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JOAQUIN, THE SADDLE KING.

A ROMANCE OF MURIETA'S FIRST FIGHT.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," ETC., ETC.



BY A SWIFT, DESPERATE STRUGGLE, JOAQUIN MURIETA STOOD ERECT UPON THE STONE WALL AMID A CLOUD OF LIME AND DUST, WHILE HIS GOOD HORSE WENT DOWN TO A CRUEL DEATH UPON THE RAGGED BOWLDERS BELOW.

Joaquin, the Saddle King.

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CHAPTER I.

THE RIVAL EQUESTRIANS.

"DID you speak to me, señor?"

These words rung out clear and sharp, as the speaker turned half around in the saddle, a deepening flush upon his bronzed cheek, mingled scorn and defiance flashing from his keen, black eyes.

A smug smile was curling the mustaches of the man addressed; a tall, handsome, dashing cavalier, on whom the national costume sat with a peculiar grace, gold and silver lace flashing in the afternoon sun as his lithe form swayed in perfect unison with the restless movements of the mettled charger he bestrode.

"Not to, but of you, boy," was the careless reply. "And if you are curious to know what I said I will repeat:—what a clumsy way to bestride a horse!"

"Tis an American style of mounting, and one you might often have seen, Señor Camplido, while your regiment was over the border, had not your back generally taken the place where your front should have been—facing the Texans!" came the swift retort, followed by a short, mocking laugh.

Both struck home, and rankled deeply. A mad glow filled the eyes of the elder man, and his hand grasped the haft of the short, heavy sword that was clasped close to the saddle, beneath one muscular thigh.

As though on a pivot, the black stallion wheeled around, its youthful rider boldly facing his formidable antagonist, no less eager than he for the collision. But just then an old man rushed forward with upraised hand and warning voice:—

"Hold, señores! Have you forgotten the general's oath? He who first draws weapons on these grounds, dies the death of a dog by the garrote!"

With a scowl Camplido looked at the gray-beard for a moment, but then released his weapon, and turned his horse's head as though to ride away. The affair was not to end in such a tame manner, however.

For reasons which will shortly be given, there was a rivalry between Camplido and the youth, none the less intense because it had till now smoldered beneath the surface. Each man could read the heart of the other clearly as a printed page, and each knew that the time must come, sooner or later, when one must yield or die.

There was a wide gulf between them socially. Manuel Camplido was an ex-captain of lancers, a rich ranchero who could number his horses and cattle by the thousands, while the youth, a native of Sonora, JOAQUIN MURIETA by name, was then known only as a simple vaquero in the employ of General Santa Anna.

Even at that early age, Joaquin could with some propriety claim the title of the SADDLE KING, and his remarkable skill served to deepen the hatred felt for him by Camplido.

On this occasion, the young Sonorian had vaulted into the saddle without aid of hand or foot, just as his rival rode up, which feat drew forth the disparaging remark already recorded.

"There is a limit to these grounds, where the orders of the general do not extend, and it is a pleasant afternoon for a little ride," pointedly uttered Murieta. "If the high and mighty Señor Don Manuel Camplido please—"

"You dare to challenge me—a Spanish gentleman!" cried the ranchero, his face livid with rage. "You—a nameless, low-born boy—"

"A boy, I grant you, but a boy whose name has never been sullied by cowardice—a boy who proclaims himself your superior in blood and manhood—your master in every thing that demands courage, skill and nerve—ay! a boy as much your better as the Americans you curse—at a safe distance—are the superiors of all you craven, milk-hearted inlanders!" impetuously cried Joaquin.

An angry cry came from all who heard him, and full twenty pair of eyes flashed venomously at this bold defiance. But Joaquin only laughed contemptuously.

"Bah! had you looked one-half as fierce in the time of need, as you look now, Texas would still be a part of Mexico—for the cowardly Americans, as you call them, would have fled in terror. There was plenty of running, and the Americans did their part—but only when you and your sort showed them the way. When they could come to close quarters, they took their taste of steel in front—not like some I could name, who returned from the wars with their uniform striped and slashed like the back of a runaway slave—and in precisely the same place!"

Camplido was almost suffocating with rage, for he had received one wound during a hasty retreat, in the portion of his body where he alone was unable to see the scar.

"You—you dare to praise the heathen Americans—"

"Ay! because they are men! I have lived with them—ate, fought and ridden with them. I am proud to call them my friends—I only wish they were my countrymen. From them I learned to ride, and clumsy or not, I came here to teach you the first elements of the art!"

At this juncture, a low-browed, heavy-set, villainous-looking fellow made a quick gesture which caught the eye of Manuel Camplido. Its meaning was readily understood, and a cold, sneering smile replaced the look of devilish hatred as the ranchero once more released the hilt of his weapon.

"For once I will lower myself to your level, braggart boy. You have your chosen horse—I have mine. If you can act as well as boast, follow the example I set you."

"I would rather fight than ride against you," retorted Joaquin, laughing, "but maybe the day will come when you can borrow courage enough to face cold steel or hot lead in the hands of a boy!"

"If you do not break your neck before this trial of skill is concluded, I will take great pleasure in cutting your throat immediately afterward," insolently retorted Camplido.

Joaquin made no reply to this boast save by a short, careless laugh, and then the rival equestrians began their preparations for the display of daring and skillful horsemanship. Despite the slurs which had mutually been cast, each knew that the other was no mean antagonist, and not a single point by which victory might be won or defeat bestowed was neglected. Dismounting, every strap and buckle was thoroughly tested.

Their movements were closely watched by the members of Santa Anna's household, and here again was the Mexican nature characteristically portrayed. Not one among them but hated the young Sonorian as the devil is fabled to hate holy water; not one but what fervently longed to witness his downfall in the present contest, for that would mean banishment; yet the wagers so loudly offered by Camplido's nearest adherents, were promptly taken by those who, while hating Joaquin more or less, did not allow prejudice to blind them to a sense of their own interests.

"Either way we will be consoled," grimaced one old rascal. "If the son-of-a-devil loses, his humiliation will be a salve to cover the loss of my pesos, and should he prove the victor, a quart or two of brandy will wash away the stain our gold won through such an evil agent!"

That the Mexicans are a race of natural-born horsemen, their worst enemies cannot deny. They live in the saddle, and only need a little more courage to become the finest cavalymen in the world. And these two men were admirable specimens of their race, both superb riders, though the critical eye could detect a strong contrast between them.

There was a suspicion of stiffness in the movements of Camplido, a degree of stateliness that savored strongly of the camp; the precision of his exercise was at a loss of grace—the quality, united with wild, peculiar abandon, that was most conspicuous in his youthful rival.

At best but a vague idea can be given through the medium of printed words—only an unsatisfactory shadow of the curious feats performed and for that reason no detailed description will be attempted here.

Camplido led the way, and Joaquin followed the example thus set him with swift and easy accuracy. Each feat and trick was imitated so exactly, that even those of his enemies who had wagered their money against him, had nothing to say. It was horse against horse, as man against man, and the noble creatures seemed to feel the hot rivalry that consumed their masters. For a full hour did the struggle for supremacy last, and at the end of that period was no nearer a decision than at the beginning, though what advantage there was lay with the youth, since he had followed his rival throughout. But there was a laughing light in his keen eyes, a mocking smile upon his lip that made those backing Camplido feel nervous. What would be the result when he should take the lead?

"There's more coming," muttered one of the vaqueros, as the ex-captain of lancers drew rein and offered his fiery horse a breathing spell. "Look at his face—is that the eye of a beaten man? Yet the boy rides well; better by far than I thought was in the rascal!"

There was no reply, for just then Joaquin faced his antagonist and uttered:

"You spoke of riding, señor. If you have warmed your horse sufficiently in this trifling exercise, suppose we settle down to work."

This taunt struck home, and the swarthy face of Camplido flushed hotly. By a powerful effort he calmed his voice and made reply:

"As you say, I have only been playing with you, that your downfall may be the more complete. Strip your horse, and prepare for business."

As he spoke, Camplido dismounted and yielding his animal to the eager hands of his adherents, gave them his instructions in a few hasty words.

Joaquin watched their movements closely,

for he knew only too well that he numbered only enemies among them—that not one of them all but would gladly play him some foul trick could it be done without incurring too great a risk.

The riding ground was a level area comprising some half a dozen acres, bounded on one side by the hacienda and its massive walls, on other two sides by stone walls six feet high and a yard in thickness, while the other side was bordered by a deep and wide barranca or canyon, the sides of which were almost perpendicular, the bottom being paved with rough and ragged bowlders.

Manuel Camplido moved toward the northeast corner formed by the barranca and the wall. By his directions the Mexican rolled stones, cacti and brush in a line parallel with the gulch, and barely more than a yard from the escarpment, building up a barrier breast high. When this was fairly under way, he turned to Joaquin, with an evil smile that showed his white, pointed teeth.

"You shall see what a gentleman rider can dare and accomplish. Without saddle or bridle, I will ride at full speed along that narrow path and leap yonder wall—a feat that will test both horse and man. Follow me—or own yourself a bragging coward!"

The young man laughed insolently.

"Bah! is that all? From your tragic looks I expected something better—something that a man might perform without blushing for shame lest he be caught wasting his time at such childish sport."

Involuntarily Camplido grasped the hilt of his sword, but Joaquin sat with his arms akimbo, one hand close to the gleaming butt of a revolver, and the ex-captain released his weapon with a forced laugh.

"Words are easy spoken. My horse against yours that your nerve fails you—that you either flinch from the test, or break your neck through your awkwardness."

"Done!" was the quick reply. "And when I have won I will banter you to take one leap after me. If you accept, I will own my mistake and confess that you are a man, instead of the craven I have always considered you."

Again that evil smile, which Joaquin felt boded him treachery, curled Camplido's mustaches.

"Whatever mortal man can imagine possible in horse and rider, that I claim is not beyond my skill. For fear that you may fail to cross yonder wall, make known your conditions now, and I swear to perform the feat, either after your lead, or as a tribute to your death, should your nerve fail."

"The leap is the same as that you propose: to cross that wall, by this narrow trail, without saddle or bridle. But in addition, I will bind my hands behind my back, and have my eyes bandaged. And if you dare to follow my lead in that, another test occurs to me."

"And that test is?"

"Our hands will remain bound as before, but our eyes left at liberty. One lasso will join our horses' heads together, another one be noosed around our own throats. Our animals will be blinded, to keep them from flinching. Then we will advance at a gallop and try to leap over the barranca!"

Despite his efforts at self-control, Camplido uttered an exclamation of horror at this sanguinary proposition.

"The horse does not live that could leap blindfolded from side to side!" he muttered, his lips twitching nervously.

"Very true; but it is easy enough to leap from top to the bottom," laughed the reckless young Sonorian.

"It would be rank suicide. Bah! you are only talking for the sake of hearing your own voice."

"True as there is a sun shining in the heavens yonder, I am in deadly earnest," replied Murieta, his voice stern, his face hard set. "You shall take the blindfold leap over the wall after me, and if you succeed in that, then comes the other, or I will tear off your borrowed plumes and brand you far and wide as the white-livered craven I still believe you. You know, as well as I, that this world is not large enough to contain us both. Twice already you have attempted my life through hired tools, too cowardly to face me yourself. I hate you as bitterly, but I ask no odds. I am ready to run the same risk—to die, if necessary, to make sure that you do not live to claim the dear prize we both aim at."

The concluding words were uttered in a guarded tone that was inaudible to all other ears, but with an intensity that showed how terribly in earnest was the youth.

For an instant Camplido visibly flinched and shrunk away from his fiery antagonist, but then he rallied and laughed harshly.

"Enough! I accept the challenge. Follow me first, and if you then have nerve enough to repeat your words, I will not balk you—be sure of that!"

By this time the rough barrier was about completed, and the rival equestrians turned their attention to their horses.

Though Joaquin had made light of the proposed feat, no one knew better than he how perilous it really was. Without saddle or

bridle, their animals would practically be uncontrolled, and a six-foot wall is no trifling obstacle under the most favorable circumstances. To make the leap from such a narrow trail, with the deep barranca yawning beside them, doubled the peril. A single misstep, the least miscalculation, would be almost certain death.

With a clear field and no favor, Joaquin Murieta would have cared as little for the proposed test as he pretended. He knew his horse, and his horse knew its master. More than once they had performed equally as perilous feats, to forget them as soon as over, but now the circumstances were different. Joaquin realized that he had not one friend present. He had taken no pains to gain their good will, looking down upon them as inferior beings, and rather displaying than disguising his contempt. On the contrary, Camplido was a favorite, and the young Sonorian felt that there would be foul play toward himself if he gave them the slightest opportunity.

Riding aside, he watched the movements of his rival.

Evidently Camplido did not underestimate the feat he had marked out, and was resolved not to throw away a chance. Mounting his barebacked steed, he rode slowly along the edge of the barranca, stroking the proud animal's arching neck and whispering to it soothingly. Then, by degrees, he increased his speed, riding close to the verge but turning aside before reaching the parallel barrier.

At length all could see that he was about to make the venture, and breathlessly they awaited. Back a hundred yards Camplido rode, then wheeled and spoke sharply to his horse, the noble creature darting swiftly along the escarpment, governed alone by its rider's thighs and knees.

One sharp cry as the wall was neared, then the stallion rose into the air like a bird, its hind hoofs barely scraping the top of the wall.

A wild, united yell of admiration burst from the crowd, but this was cut short as they saw Joaquin set his steed in motion to follow his rival, acting thus promptly the more surely to avoid the treachery which he felt sure would be shown him if practicable.

With perfect confidence in his horse, Joaquin went through no preliminary motion, but rode straight for the wall at full speed, crouching slightly forward, one hand touching his horse's neck.

From the footprints of its predecessor the black stallion rose into the air, but at that instant a gaudy red scarf flashed up from the further side of the wall and fluttered its fringe fairly against one side of its face—the right or side furthest from the barranca!

A wild snort of terror burst from the startled animal, and even while in mid-air it flinched and turned half-way around, striking heavily upon the end of the wall.

A stone gave way—then came a confused scramble—a cloud of dust—a wild, piercing scream that was cut short by a sickening thud upon the cruel rocks below!

CHAPTER II.

TREACHERY FITLY REWARDED.

BUT it was only the poor horse that fell.

The moment that red flag fluttered before his eyes, Joaquin realized how cunningly his bitter enemies had planned. Like a flash of light he remembered that sign made by Pedro Canales, the black-browed ruffian whom he knew to be the personal follower of Manuel Camplido. He could now read that signal aright, and a fierce lust for vengeance sprung up in his heart, even as he hung over the very jaws of death.

Just how it was accomplished, not one of the excited lookers-on could ever explain, but by a swift, desperate struggle, Joaquin Murieta stood erect upon the stone wall amid a cloud of lime and dust, while his good horse went down to a cruel death upon the ragged bowlders below.

A hoarse shout of devilish triumph arose from the lips of Pedro Canales as he beheld the black stallion flinch and swerve from his flaunting scarf, for he knew that his hated enemy had not one chance in a thousand of escaping death; and in that moment of triumph, he wished Joaquin to know whose brain had plotted, whose hand had executed his downfall.

But the young sonorian made the most of that single chance, and, by a wonderful display of activity and nerve, leaped clear of his struggling horse and alighted upon the stone wall, even as the treacherous rascal gave vent to his exultation almost at his very feet.

A sharp, snarling cry broke from Joaquin's lips, and he dropped heavily upon the unmasked traitor, dashing both feet into his upturned face and crushing him to the earth a bleeding, bewildered mass.

Lightly he leaped clear of the fellow, who confusedly gasped out his amazement and terror as he struggled to arise. In one hand he still grasped the iron ramrod of an escopette to which the red scarf was attached, and the sight of this, recalling his narrow escape and the death of his loved horse, maddened Joaquin much as it might have enraged a baited wild bull.

With one strong thrust of his foot Joaquin rolled Pedro Canales over, then tore the ramrod

from his grasp, raining blows upon his writhing person with all the power of his good right arm. Blood followed each and every stroke, for the young Sonorian was thoroughly aroused, and his victim howled out most lustily, mingling his prayers for mercy with broken curses and furious threats.

All this had transpired almost with the rapidity of thought. To do him justice, not one of the party save Camplido and Canales even suspected the treachery that was to be played, and before they could fairly realize the truth, the wild yells of the rascal groom came to their ears from the spot where his punishment was being inflicted. Then, with excited shouts, as yet not wholly posted, they rushed to the wall and began clambering over it; but another was before them to the rescue of his comrade in evil.

Camplido had not anticipated such a rapid following of his lead, and, as he alighted safely, made no effort to restrain his fiery speed, which was rendered uncontrollable for the moment by the horrible scream emitted by the black stallion as it felt itself whirling down to death. Taken completely by surprise, Camplido was unable to master his horse until punishment was falling fast and heavy upon his rascally coadjutor, but then he wheeled and rode swiftly down upon his rival.

Even in his madness Joaquin was not one to suffer himself to be taken by surprise, and, with one last blow that bent the stout rod double, he spurned the bleeding rascal and faced his prime enemy, revolver in hand.

"Back! you murderous scoundrel!" he cried, his tones clear and cold as the knell of death, though his face was hotly flushed and his eyes blazed like living coals. "Halt! put up your weapon, or I will bore your skull with a half-ounce ball!"

Camplido was but slightly armed. Sword and pistol-belt had been laid aside when preparing for that hazardous leap, leaving him only a long, slender poniard that fitted to a sheath close above his heart. This had been retained, not through any thought of need, for the cunning plan of Pedro Canales could scarcely fail, but because one of his race would think sooner of losing his clothes than laying aside his knife. The yells and howling of Canales, the sight of Joaquin Murieta as he plied the blood-stained ramrod, told Camplido plainly enough that his dastardly scheme had failed, and he knew that there must come a speedy reckoning. Mad with baffled rage and hatred, he wheeled his horse and with gleaming knife, dashed back hoping to ride the young Sonorian down before he could realize his danger—only to find the frowning muzzle of a revolver staring him full in the face.

Mechanically the baffled villain gave the sign that brought his admirably trained horse to a pause. His face was ashen gray, his frame trembling, his unarmed hand outstretched with an appealing gesture.

For an instant Joaquin kept the cowed rascal covered, ready to fulfill his threat at the least sign of rebellion; but this was not given, and he lowered his weapon with a hard, contemptuous laugh.

"Wretched bungler though he has showed himself, your dirty tool is a better man than his master, Manuel Camplido. He tried to do the work assigned him, but you—you tremble and show your coward colors the moment a man faces you! You are bold enough to attempt murder when you believe there is no chance for a return blow from your victim. You can plot with a brutal, ignorant rascal like Pedro Canales, who would unhesitatingly cut the throat of his own mother for a single gold onza—"

A sudden change came over Manuel Camplido. His face still remained an ashen white, but the look of abject terror fled from his eyes and gave place to a malignant glow of hatred, while his cowering frame grew more erect, nor did his voice tremble as before.

"You make bold charges, boy, but they are lies! You have failed to make your boasting good—you have missed the leap you affected to scorn, and now, in hopes of hiding your disgrace, you rave about treachery and foul play that exists only in your own imagination. Hal! strike home, Pedro! A dozen onzas if you split his devil's heart!"

The new-born courage of Manuel Camplido is easily explained. While he was cowering before the indignant Sonorian, he saw Pedro Canales slowly gathering himself up from the base of the wall where Joaquin had cast him, brushing the mingled blood and dust from his eyes with one hand, while the other groped at his belt for the long knife that hung there. A fiendish smile, that was almost a snarl, showed his discolored fangs as he recognized Joaquin, his back turned as he confronted the ex-captain of lancers. Without a moment's hesitation, he leaped forward, one hand clutching at the young Sonorian's throat, the other making a furious stroke with the gleaming weapon—and this it was that drew forth the exultant scream from Camplido's lips.

But Joaquin Murieta was no ordinary man. Knowing that he stood alone in the midst of a score of unscrupulous enemies, his every sense was upon the alert. He rightly suspected the cause of the abrupt change in the demeanor of

his arch enemy, and this was confirmed by the eager looks of the vaqueros who had partially scaled the stone wall. Faint though it was, he detected the venomous hiss as Canales inhaled his breath in summoning his strength for the assault, and leaping lightly aside, he faced around just as the would-be assassin made his double stroke.

Only his catlike quickness saved him from instant death. Even as it was, Canales's bloody fingers left a mark upon his neck, and the swiftly descending knife slit open the clothes on his shoulder. But then, as the rascal staggered, the heavy pistol-butt descended upon his head with a sickening crash, and he fell upon his face like a dead man.

Joaquin had not time to deal a second blow, even if it had been needed, for Camplido urged his horse forward, and bending low as he rode, struck savagely at his enemy as he passed. Only a swift side leap saved the youth from the hungry steel, and treading upon a loose stone, his ankle turned, throwing him upon one knee, and causing him to drop his pistol.

With marvelous rapidity he recovered his balance, and then, with a cocked revolver in each hand, he held his enemies in check.

"Hold hard, all!" his voice rung out clear and menacingly. "The first man who dares take one step forward dies the death of a dog! You know me."

They did know him, and far better now than ever before. Time and again they had witnessed his almost marvelous skill with the weapons he held, and bitterly as they hated him, not a man among that score dared disobey.

Camplido's horse had only paused in its swift rush when its breast touched the stone wall. On one side yawned the barranca. He could leave his close quarters only by brushing past the young Sonorian, and the ex-captain knew that any such attempt could end only in his death.

Trembling in every fiber, pale as death, he cowered before that frowning muzzle, the picture of terror.

Joaquin held the key of the situation, and the sardonic smile that curled his faintly shaded lip told how thoroughly he enjoyed it. Yet there was death in his fiercely glittering eyes. He firmly meant to kill his bitter enemy in the end, and was only waiting for the craven to make another hostile move to excuse the avenging shot. But first, he should drink the cup of shame down to the last dregs.

"Manuel Camplido, cowardly dog, you have run to the end of your tether. You have hired assassins, only less despicable than yourself, to take my life. Why, you and I both know. You dared not meet me face to face as one bold man should meet another. You have forfeited your life, and now I mean to claim my own."

"I never—there is some mistake," faltered Camplido, only to be cut short by that cold, insulting laugh.

"Liar! Even your own tongue shall betray you. Did you not give Pedro Canales his orders—did you not bid him flaunt that rag in the face of my horse, hoping that it would fail in the leap and carry me with it to the bottom of the barranca?"

Camplido stammered out a denial, only to be checked.

"Careful! unless you are eager to die with a lie upon your foul lips. I saw the signs that passed between you two before you dared accept my challenge. I knew you both to be unscrupulous scoundrels, but I did not think you would dare play such a dastardly trick, even upon me. You hired Pedro Canales to flaunt that rag; confess it, or, by all the saints! I swear that I will force you at the pistol-muzzle to precede me in the blindfold leap I spoke of—and not only that, but if you escape with a whole neck, side by side we will take the leap to the bottom of the barranca!"

If the young Sonorian did not mean all that he said, then he was a most accomplished actor. Camplido at least believed him, and preferred shame to certain death. In a low, husky voice he faltered out a confession of the truth of the charges brought against him, but Joaquin was merciless.

"Speak louder, craven dog!" he cried, his voice ringing with utter contempt. "Speak out, so all may hear clearly. Let these men know what a dastardly coyote they have been so humbly worshiping and looking up to as only a trifle below the saints!"

The cornered villain glared around him in hopes of finding some means of escaping this bitter humiliation. But the deadly revolver covered him closely. He could not retreat. He was too close to the wall to leap it, and before he could fling himself over the barrier, a bullet would find his life. Nor could he see any hope in the faces of the vaqueros. They were not of the sort to cling to the fortunes of a defeated and disgraced leader, and some of those bronzed faces even bore traces of growing contempt. Had he succeeded, they would have been profuse in their congratulations and rejoicings; but he had failed—and the young Sonorian was still keeping one cocked revolver turned in their direction.

Joaquin called out warningly:

"Beware! Make one movement without my

consent, and the devil will gain an ally below at the loss of one on earth! Repeat the words I dictate. Speak clearly, or I will set your lispng tongue forever free with a bullet. This is my last warning. Are you ready?

"I, Manuel Camplido, ex-captain of lancers, which position, through arrant cowardice on the field of battle, I was obliged to resign or be cashiered, confess myself a craven scoundrel and treacherous villain. I confess that I hired Pedro Canales to play this foul trick, in the hopes of escaping defeat at the hands of Joaquin Murieta, my master and better in every shape—"

In a hoarse voice that told how terribly every word wrenched his heart-strings, Camplido began this enforced confession, but as Joaquin proceeded, the villain's voice grew more husky, and the last words, in praise of his bitterly hated rival, refused to pass his throat. The shame and ignominy thus thrust upon him, lent him a desperate sort of nerve, and flashing forth his poniard, he urged his chafing horse upon the young Sonorian.

Joaquin never flinched, but his revolver cracked sharply, and a howl of mingled pain and despair broke from the lips of the villain, as he felt the steel shattered by the wonderfully accurate bullet, and even the useless hilt torn from his hand.

The next instant he was seized by the foot and hurled headlong to the ground, while Joaquin leaped swiftly upon the horse, his revolvers once more ready for use, as he turned toward the excited retainers and sternly cried:

"Steady, there! you have no concern in this quarrel, and if you crowd upon me, the results be upon your own heads."

Universally as they hate the young Sonorian not one among the crowd was eager for martyrdom, and like a row of parti-colored buzzards, they kept their places upon the wall.

"Get up, dog!" cried Joaquin, turning contemptuously to Camplido who, half-stunned, still groveled upon the ground beside the senseless vaquero. "You have forfeited your life a dozen times over, and I have sworn to exact

the penalty; but for once I will break my oath. I will not disgrace my manhood by shedding the blood of such a dastardly craven."

Weak and trembling, thoroughly unnerved, Manuel Camplido arose and stood before his conqueror with downcast looks. Truly, he had received a lesson which he would never forget, and a convulsive tremor ran over him from head to foot, as his rival uttered a low, mocking laugh.

"A miserable slave you are in looks, even as in heart. I give you your life, because, when this day's work spreads far and wide, as it surely will, life will be a far greater curse to you than death. Whenever you dare attempt to flaunt your borrowed plumes again in the presence of brave men or fair woman, some scornful tongue will whisper the name of the poor boy over whom you tried to ride rough-shod, and then, as you shirk away, you will bitterly curse the cowardliness that will not suffer you to take the life that is only a living shame and a burden. For this I spare you; not through pity.

"Now climb over that wall, and go to where your saddle lies. Attempt to slink away, and I swear to follow and flog you with a whip until there are more stripes upon your body than there are hairs on your head. Go!"

Thoroughly cowed, the ex-captain of lancers obeyed without a word, while Joaquin, laughing shrilly, urged his newly acquired horse into a swift gallop, circling over the level ground for a minute, then wheeling and racing at full speed along the edge of the barranca. Like a winged animal the noble creature rose at the wall, leaping it neatly, then raced up to where Camplido, sullen and downcast, stood beside his saddle.

The young Sonorian leaped lightly to the ground.

"You killed my horse, I take yours in return. Saddle and bridle him, dog of a slave! Lively, now!"

Never a word spoke Camplido as he obeyed, and the retainers watched the strange scene in open-eyed amazement.

When all was arranged, Joaquin vaulted into the saddle and gathered up the reins, saying:

Houston publicly complimented him on the battle-field just won.

For one who has been granted an impartial view of both sides of the case, there is a strong temptation to linger over the early and innocent days of Joaquin Murieta, but the story I have set out to narrate, presses its claims.

Joaquin was also engaged in the war between the United States and Mexico, but here the records are less clear and satisfactory. It is known that he fought for his adopted country, shoulder to shoulder with his old friends of the Texan war; beyond this, all is obscure, until Joaquin returned home after peace was declared.

The wild, adventurous life he had led, unfitted Joaquin for the monotonous routine of the retired stock farm, and ere long he was once more a wanderer, bringing up at the City of Mexico, where a chance display of his really superb horsemanship attracted the attention of General Santa Anna, always noted for his love of equestrianism, who gave the young Sonorian a situation in his own household. But Joaquin soon wearied of city life and its stately ceremonials, and by his own request was transferred to the hacienda where the opening of this story finds him.

His new situation did not prove to be a bed of roses. The young Sonorian held a high opinion of himself and his accomplishments, nor was he at all backward in letting this be known among his comrades. He considered himself their superior, and scrupled not to say as much in plain words. Only the almost miraculous skill which he displayed with all weapons, his great strength and active tirelessness, kept the more envious from disputing his pretensions at the dagger's point. As it was, Joaquin soon found himself shunned and set apart from the rest. He would speedily have grown sick of such a life, had not a fortunate chance thrown him into the company of a being who was destined to shed upon his life both sunshine and shadow—a fair young girl named Carmela Felix, the daughter of Carillo Felix, a proud Spaniard of the true *sangre azul*, owner of a large cattle farm which adjoined the Santa Anna estate.

One better calculated to captivate the heart of Joaquin than this beautiful young Amazon, could hardly be imagined, and there was a spice of romance in their first meeting that strongly predisposed them for what followed.

While riding one day, nearly a month before the date on which this story opens, Joaquin found Carmela afoot in the midst of an excited body of half-wild cattle. An infuriated bull was making mad plunges at her, and though the maiden nimbly eluded his blind rushes, left alone she must soon have succumbed to fatigue.

Joaquin clove his way through the crowded mass, sunk a bullet through the crazy animal's brain, raised the maiden in his arms and with his stout whip, fought their way outside to safety. Not until then did a word pass between them, but Joaquin had eyes, and they told him that never before had he beheld such a marvel of beauty and perfection in face and form, torn though her dress and blood-stained her hands, one of which still grasped a slender dagger.

The story of her adventure may be briefly summarized. Out for a pleasure ride, Carmela, as she had frequently done before, lassoed the leader of the herd, but by some mischance her horse was overthrown, and when she recovered her footing, the angry bull was charging upon her, the snorting herd swiftly closing around them, rendering flight impossible. Her horse was crippled with a broken leg. Death seemed inevitable, but Carmela came of a good fighting race, and her native courage did not desert her.

"One last word, dog. I spare your life now, but beware the next time! At the first attempt to use your fangs on me, you die! This is the only warning I will give you."

He did not notice the ugly fire in Camplido's eye, or he would not have turned his back so carelessly. While crossing the wall, Camplido had received a revolver from one of the vaqueros, and now drawing it, fired full at the brain of the young Sonorian. But his nerves were shaken, and Joaquin only felt the wind of the bullet as it grazed his cheek. Instantly turning, his revolver spoke, and Camplido, without cry or groan, fell heavily upon his face.

CHAPTER III.

JOAQUIN AND HIS LADY LOVE.

As the double report split the air, Joaquin's enemies made a rush toward him, only to pause again and crowd behind each other as he turned his still smoking revolver upon them.

"Keep your distance, gentlemen!" he said, menacingly. "Don't crowd to your own funeral. I'm growing tired of being baited, and when I bite, I'll make my teeth meet in the flesh!"

Once more the crowd was held at bay by a single man, and as he read the evidence of his power as given by the pale cheeks and cringing forms, Joaquin's rage quickly died away, giving place to a sort of contemptuous pleasure.

"Gentlemen, we are fellow-servants no longer. From this hour I am a free man. Live on as cowards live, if you prefer, licking the dust from the feet of such contemptible scoundrels as this Manuel Camplido—I have served my time. Tell him, when he recovers, that I have spared his life yet once more, because I prefer his living to hear and realize the full extent of his disgrace. *Adios, senores!*"

With a mocking bow and low sweep of his sombrero, the young Sonorian headed his horse for the wall, leaped it, and then sped away over the plain like the winged bird of the desert.*

Joaquin Murieta rode swiftly away from the scene of his signal triumph, but his thoughts no

With only a frail dagger she faced the grizzly monster, and as it lowered its horns to impale her form, she leaped to one side, at the same time bending low and striking full at the eyes of the bull. Her aim was true, and the sight of one eye destroyed. More furious than ever, the routing animal again charged—again she eluded him, and once more the swift, dextrously-handled blade did its work. Wholly blinded though it now was, the bull seemed guided by instinct, and the intrepid maiden must soon have fallen a victim to its fury, had not Joaquin providentially appeared upon the scene.

Proud and self-assured though he was, when Joaquin learned the name of the maiden, he felt somewhat abashed and ill at ease. Carillo Felix was then a power in the land, fabulously rich and reputed the proudest of the proud. And yet, after escorting Carmela home, Joaquin admitted to himself that he was over head and ears in love, and mentally registered a vow that he would win her for his bride, or descend to the grave unwedded.

He knew that Don Felix would scorn the idea of an alliance with a simple vaquero, whose only fortune was his good horse, but in his dreams that night were visions of a moonlight elopement, and with the sun he arose, far more confident than when he lay down.

That day he showed far more cordiality toward his fellow vaqueros than ever before, and as his adventure had somehow leaked out, Joaquin learned far more than was agreeable to him about Carmela and her affairs; among other items of news that she was then betrothed to Don Manuel Camplido, ex-captain of lancers, a frequent visitor at the Santa Anna hacienda.

Though they had never come into actual contact, thanks to their widely different stations in life, Joaquin had from the first disliked the arrogant don, and now felt that he fairly hated him.

The knowledge of her betrothal, lent Joaquin a desperate sort of courage, and he watched closely for an opportunity to meet the fair maiden who had so hopelessly enslaved him. That opportunity came speedily, and after it others, until the young couple fell into the habit of meeting somewhere on the wide plain nearly every day; but as yet no word of love had been openly spoken, though after each parting, Joaquin would resolve that the next meeting should not end until he knew the worst—until he had avowed his ardent passion and besought her to flee with him.

Not many of these interviews had taken place before Joaquin was warned of breakers ahead, by Don Camplido's rudely interrupting them and carrying Carmela away with him. The young Sonorian would have resented the insulting words promptly, only for a beseeching look in the eyes of the maiden, who knew that her proud father's rage would be terrible should the whole truth be brought to his ears through a collision between the two rivals.

The ensuing days were full of plotting and counter-plotting. By means of cunning spies, Camplido learned that there was substantial foundation for his suspicions, that these meetings between his betrothed and the humble vaquero were far too frequent to be wholly the result of chance. He could not openly recognize such a rival, and so took a truly Spanish method of remedying the annoying evil, by placing his hired assassin at work. But Joaquin was not blind, even if in love, and on both occasions foiled the secret attempts upon his life, wringing a full confession from the lips of the second assassin.

With these points fully understood, the reader can readily comprehend the motives which brought the rivals into personal collision, as already recorded in these pages.

* Few names stand out in more lurid light on the blood-stained pages of Western history than does that of Joaquin Murieta. It is indelibly written in crimson letters that cover the Golden State from one end to the other. It is still breathed with curses, deep and bitter, by those whose friends and relatives of a former generation were fated to cross the trail of the "blood-drinking monster;" but it was a wise tongue that declared the devil is never so black as painted.

Much has been written concerning the robber chief, and his exploits after he began his career of blood in the Californian mines—much that had a foundation on truth, still more that was idle rumor if not deliberate fabrication. But the early life of Joaquin Murieta has remained untouched, though the writer of this has long had important documents in his possession which throw much light upon the subject. In addition, he has known three several gentlemen who were personally acquainted with the Sonorian; one who dug out the "pay-dirt" that Joaquin washed on the Stanislaus river, before the bloody brand of Cain was set upon his brow; another who rode with Captain Harry Love on the death trail that ended in the decapitation of the great outlaw; a third who was born and reared within a day's ride of the Murieta ranch, and who never tired of recalling the boyish exploits of his daring playmate.

When the true history of Joaquin Murieta shall be written, it will be shown that he was the victim of a remarkable fatality—a chain of disasters and misfortunes that would have wrecked nine hundred and ninety-nine men out of every thousand. Those who knew him as a boy, say that a purer hearted lad never drew the breath of life, his greatest faults being a superabundance of animal spirits, a love of display and a very quick temper. He was noted for his truthfulness, in a land where a lie is thought no sin if there is aught to be gained by telling one. He would wade through fire and water to serve a friend, and even as a boy, was remarkable for the reverence he showed for all who wore the garb of his mother.

Joaquin Murieta was born in the capital of Sonora, in Mexico, on the 19th day of June, 1829, of well-to-do parents, who gave him a fair education for that time and country. Two old *gambrusinos*, or gold-hunters, were pensioners at the rancho, and to their tales of marvelous adventures in the then nearly unknown regions of Texas, may be, in part at least, attributed the fact of Joaquin's running away from home when he had scarcely entered his teens. Already a good shot and fine rider, the little Sonorian made the best of his way into Texas, and there fell in with the men for admiration of whom he was fated more than once to draw steel. He trapped and hunted with the Americans; he learned their language and all that they could teach him of prairie lore and Indian fighting; he envied their skill with rifle and pistol, nor did he rest content until he could hold his own successfully with both.

He made flying trips to his home and people, but could not content himself long. Association with *free men* had given him a strong distaste for the degraded race hanging around the rancho, and once more he would ride away to join the comrades he loved and respected.

He was in Texas when the war for independence began, and he fought side by side with his American friends. Still only a boy, he fairly earned his title of manhood, and on one occasion General Sam

† From this, it will be seen that I am not writing altogether at random. While not claiming absolute truth for every incident recorded in this, and other volumes which may follow, I can honestly affirm that they are one and all founded on fact. J. E. B., Jr.

longer dwelt upon the man whom he had so thoroughly humiliated and left lying in the dust with the track of a bullet creasing his skull.

"I must see her—ay! even though I ride up to the gates and demand an audience with the proud don himself!" and Joaquin flung back his long locks with a defiant toss of his handsome head as he galloped on with free rein. "They will give me little law, before the bloodhounds strike my trail. Let me see Carmela, and if she prove the true woman I believe, we will laugh at their pursuit. If not—if she says me nay—well, there will be music in the air and fresh food in plenty for the buzzards!"

His keen eyes swept the plain before him in search of the fair rider whom he longed to meet, but his brow grew darker as the distance dividing him from the Felix hacienda lessened without his hopes being rewarded.

Time was especially valuable to him now. Camplido would not rest easy under his shameful defeat. Even at that moment he might be setting his cunning tools upon the death-trail.

The Felix hacienda was situated in a pleasant tract. Here and there were scattered clumps of trees, like islands on the bosom of a sleeping ocean, and, hoping against hope, Joaquin sped along, searching these one by one.

Suddenly he checked his horse, and shading his eyes with one hand, gazed breathlessly toward one of the *mottes* which he had but recently passed by. And then a joyous exclamation burst from his lips as he beheld a female figure emerge from the foliage, waving a light scarf as though in hopes of attracting his attention.

The distance was too great for an unassisted eye to recognize features of the human face, but with the intuition of a true lover, Joaquin divined the truth, and, wheeling, sped swiftly toward the *motte*, while the maiden, when assured that her signal was being answered, glided back into the cool shadows.

It was indeed Carmela Felix, blushing and trembling as Joaquin leaped to the ground, hastily securing his horse, then hastened to her side and impulsively gathered her to his bosom, pressing hot kisses upon her ripe lips.

With a faint, half-angry, half-abashed cry the maiden slipped from his embrace, her eyes flashing, her bosom panting with mingled shame and indignation.

"It is cowardly to take advantage of my indiscretion—you would not dare—" she panted, but paused as the young Sonorian stood before her with bowed head, the picture of repentance.

"I crave your pardon, lady," he breathed softly, a new and strange sadness in his voice that startled her. "I was wild, insane—I knew not what I was doing."

"It was very wrong—almost shameful—when I trusted you so implicitly," added Carmela, but her voice was softer, and a less agitated observer might have seen that she was not mortally offended, after all.

"I admit my sin, but I could not help it. When I remembered that we may never meet again—"

"What do you mean?" faltered Carmela.

"Only that I am a hunted fugitive, fleeing for life from a bitter enemy against whose life I dare not lift my hand even in self-defense, because it is dear to you—"

"My father—surely there is some mistake—"

"Not your father, lady, but your betrothed, Don Manuel Camplido," quickly responded Joaquin, watching her closely as he spoke, for he felt that his whole future depended upon the answer she made.

"He? I hate—I loathe and despise him!" impatiently cried Carmela, and there was no shade of hypocrisy in the frown of utter disgust that shaded her fair brow.

Joaquin caught his breath quickly, scarcely daring to believe his ears. He placed his hand upon the maiden's shoulder and gently turned her face to the clear light of the evening sun, gazing keenly, eagerly into her lustrous eyes. But he read no deception there, and a flood of joy filled his heart, as he once more clasped her to his breast, regardless of her faint struggles.

"Thank Heaven! I feared that you loved that craven villain who is not worthy to kiss the earth your dainty feet tread upon! My darling—my own—for mine you are—I read the truth in your beautiful eyes!"

Carmela no longer struggled to free herself from his ardent embrace. Instead, her lithe form yielded, her head drooped upon his shoulder, and as if unconsciously her red-ripe lips pouted—and then were hidden by his.

It was the purest, holiest moment of the young Sonorian's life, for he knew now that he was loved even as he himself adored; but then a soft, regretful sigh issued from the maiden's bosom, and the former shade of anxiety returned to her fair brow.

"A blissful dream, but it cannot last!" she sighed. "For a moment I forgot what you said—that your life is in danger—"

Her speech was checked by an ardent kiss, then Joaquin said, with a light, careless laugh:

"The only danger that I dreaded is past, darling—the dread that you love another. Now that I am convinced of the glad truth—now that I know you love me, I can laugh all

the rest to scorn. If Manuel Camplido tries to make more trouble, so much the worse for him."

"He will murder you—"

"He tried that to-day, and I read him a lesson that he will not readily forget," interposed Joaquin, then briefly telling her what had transpired at the Santa Anna rancho.

"You did not kill him?"

"No. I was not quite certain how you regarded him, and only creased his thick skull with my bullet. No doubt he is now up and about, setting his bloodhounds on my trail—not for the first time, either. But I foiled them then, and have no doubts as to baffling them again."

"He is an unscrupulous enemy, and even more to be dreaded than a braver man, for he will not deal his blows openly. I fear for you, Joaquin!"

"My hand can guard my head, darling, never fear. Now that I am secure in the knowledge of your love, I care little for what that rascal can do."

"But, alas! there is worse behind, and I have not yet told you why I signaled you so anxiously. Hold me close, dear Joaquin—let me feel your heart throbbing against mine, or I cannot find courage to tell you all."

Willingly enough the young Sonorian obeyed, but his pulses beat more rapidly at her mournful tones.

"Evil eyes have been upon us when we least thought it, and evil tongues have spoken of our frequent meetings to my father. Last night he questioned me closely, and I told him the truth—the whole truth as I believed, for, dear Joaquin, strange as it may seem, I never dreamed of love in connection with you until—until you acted so impetuously when we met just now," she bravely concluded, after a brief, charming confusion.

"You do not know my father. He is very proud and stern. I believe he loves me dearly, but he told me then, and his tones were far more bitter than I ever before heard, that rather than see me mate below my rank, he would kill me with his own hand!"

"Yet he could force you to wed Manuel Camplido—who bears the brand of cowardice upon his back—who is a known drunkard, libertine, and more than suspected of being a chief of *salteadores*," bitterly cried Murieta.

"Hush!" and her dainty palm rested upon her lover's lips. "Remember that he is my father, and that you must never utter a harsh word against him in my hearing. I cannot explain the whole truth now, but I know that at first father was strongly opposed to Camplido, and even now he barely tolerates his suit. My brother Luis is at the bottom of it all, I fear—I know that he has been very reckless. In some manner Camplido holds him in his power—can bestow life or death at will. Luis is the heir to our proud name. He is father's idol, and for his sake father has consented to sacrifice me."

"This much I am sure of. There are still some points which are a mystery to me. But on the other score there can be no doubt. He will never consent to our union—"

The maiden abruptly paused, a look of pale terror overspreading her face, her limbs trembling so that they almost refused to support her weight, as a heavy footstep was heard crashing through the undergrowth and plainly nearing their place of concealment.

"Mother of Mercy!" she gasped in an agonized tone. "Flee, Joaquin! 'Tis my father—flee—flee at once!"

At the first sound Joaquin had drawn a pistol, which he still held in his hand, but he made no motion to obey the nearly distracted girl. Could he have beaten a retreat without betraying them both, doubtless he would have ridden away, for the maiden's sake, but he knew that discovery was inevitable, and his strong arm only wound more closely around the fear-stricken form.

"Too late, darling," he whispered encouragingly. "The harm, if harm there is, is already wrought. There is no crime in an honest love, and I will not slink away like a thief in the night, leaving you to bear the brunt of his displeasure."

There was no time for a reply, even if Carmela had been able to make one, for a tall, gray-haired and bearded man pushed through the bushes and confronted the lovers.

It was indeed Don Felix, the beau ideal of a haughty Spanish don, and the severe frown deepened upon his stern brow as he beheld his child in the embrace of the audacious vaquero.

Carmela, with suddenly restored strength, freed herself from Joaquin's arms, and with a pleading look, stood between her lover and her father, her ashen lips trying in vain to fashion a plea for forbearance and mercy. But the strong arm of Don Felix brushed her aside, and a bitter smile curled his lip as he noted the weapon held by Murieta.

"Complete your work, low-born dog! Murder the father, since you have disgraced the daughter!" fell in bitter accents from his lips. "You can do so without fear, since I am unarmed."

Joaquin's brow contracted darkly, and he

was forced to bite his lip until the blood flowed, to keep back the hot retort. He replaced his revolver, then spoke:

"I drew my pistol to punish the sneaking spy I believed was coming, for I knew not who else would dare intrude upon our privacy. I ask your pardon for my mistake. And now, in answer to your taunt—had those foul words fallen from any other lips than yours—her parent—the speaker would have died before the breath that uttered them grew cold upon his lips. Your daughter is as pure now as when she first lay upon her mother's bosom!"

"Pure in the one sense, no doubt, but shamefully degraded by granting clandestine meetings to a slave like you—"

"Stop, Senor Don Felix," sharply interposed Murieta. "You are letting your anger carry you too far. In every respect save that of wealth alone, my family is the peer of yours. You shall be given every opportunity to investigate—"

His speech was cut short by an insolent shrug of the shoulders as the haughty Spaniard made reply:

"I have not the slightest curiosity on that point. You are an unwelcome intruder here. Take your departure, and never dare return on penalty of being scourged with rods by my peons and hunted down with my dogs!"

"Those are hard words, for which you may yet be sorry, Don Felix," said Joaquin, calmly enough, but with a flushed cheek and kindling eye.

"You dare to threaten me, on my own grounds?" cried the Spaniard, raising the pliant whip which he held.

"Father—for my sake!" cried Carmela, clinging to his arm, tears streaming over her pale cheeks.

"Go to the house, shameless girl, and leave me alone to deal with this insolent bravo!" angrily cried the enraged father, flinging Carmela from him with such force that she staggered and would have fallen but for Joaquin's ready arm.

"I meant no threat, nor did I utter one, Don Felix," the young Sonorian said, drawing the sobbing maiden close to his side. "You must acknowledge as much when your present passion dies away. Nor can you then blame me for loving your child. I saved her life at the risk of my own. I do not recall this as a boast, but to in part explain why I dared raise my eyes in love to one so far above my apparent station in life. It was only this evening that I learned Carmela returned my love, and now, at the first opportunity, I ask you, humbly and with a full knowledge of the worth of the treasure I crave, to grant your consent to our speedy union."

At these bold but perfectly respectful words, Carmela raised her moist eyes in sudden hope that they would soften her stern parent, if not lead to his consent, but her heart grew cold with horror as she saw how terribly the proud old don was enraged by what he deemed the insolence of this demand.

He tried to speak, but wrath choked his utterance. His rage must find some vent, and raising his whip, he struck Joaquin full in the face!

In an instant the weapon was wrested from his grasp and hung quivering over his head, but an appealing cry broke from Carmela's lips, and Joaquin hurled the whip far from him.

One kiss he pressed upon her lips, then turned away and leaped into the saddle.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VOICE OF THE TEMPTER.

JOAQUIN sat erect enough in the saddle as he rode away from the timber island, but his brain throbbed and reeled like that of a drunken man. Never before had he suffered the indignity of a blow without returning it with interest, and now the red wale across his cheek burned and smarted like a streak of living fire. Never before had he been called upon to endure such a bitter ordeal, and great as was his love for Carmela Felix, he knew that he must flee from that spot in haste, or else wipe out the insult in the life-blood of her father, thus building an impassable barrier between them forever. He paid no attention to the course his horse was following, he was conscious only of that shameful blow, heard only the biting taunts hurled at him by the proud old don.

Then, like one awakening from a dream, the young Sonorian became conscious of a husky, panting voice calling aloud his name, and heard the heavy patter of footsteps close behind him. Wheeling, his face flushed, his eyes glaring, his weapons flashed forth, for his first instinct was that he had been followed by Don Felix and his myrmidons; but only one man confronted him, and that by no means the most warlike—an old gray-beard whose frame was trembling, whose voice was cracked and gasping with the desperate efforts he had made to overtake the horseman.

"Mother of Mercy, Senor Murieta," he stammered, shrinking away from the half-insane rider, "I am no bandit, no enemy of yours, but a friend. Hold hard—art thou crazy?"

Joaquin wrenched up his horse, drew one hand across his eyes as though to brush aside the bloody mist that seemed to obscure his vision, then replaced his weapons with a harsh, forced laugh.

"You, is it, Tio Tomas? I verily believe I was dreaming in the saddle, and mistook your voice for that of—What is it you want? Why do you glance around so nervously?"

The manner of the old man was indeed peculiar. He shifted his position until he put the horseman between himself and the timber island where Joaquin had left Don Felix and Carmela, while his deep-sunken eyes roved nervously around them as though in momentary expectation of beholding some unwelcome sight.

"Hist! don't talk so loud, and keep your horse moving—edge toward yonder *motte*, where we can talk without being seen. Not too fast—I am not so young and supple as I once was, worse luck! though there's a good deal left of the old man yet, on a tight pinch—indeed there is!"

Joaquin knew the old fellow well enough to feel sure that he was not acting thus in obedience to a mere whim, and once more his usual self, he rode toward the clump of timber indicated, Tio Tomas keeping close to his side as though trying to hide from some evil eyes.

These two men had frequently met, and despite the great difference in their ages, a strong friendship had risen up between them, which had steadily increased of late. If no one else, old Tio Tomas had noticed the frequent meeting of Joaquin and Carmela, and the knowing grin upon his frosty features showed that he was not without a shrewd suspicion of the truth. More than once, when the young Sonorian had failed to cross the trail of his charmer, the veteran set him aright with a seeming innocence that might easily have deceived a less close observer. As a natural consequence, the twain soon came to a full understanding, and now, though Tio Tomas was a retainer of the Felix rancho, Joaquin hesitated not to obey.

"You know what happened back there in the *motte*, then?" suddenly demanded Joaquin, darting a keen glance into the upturned face of the chattering veteran. "You have been playing the spy upon me, Tio Tomas?"

"A spy—yes; but for, not on you," came the quick response. "I saw the *senorita* enter, and then signal to you—but I saw more than that. There were other spies—two of them—Pepe and Sanchez the one-eyed. I tried to warn you, but could not catch your eye. You entered the glade, and I saw the one-eyed son-of-his-father—the devil steal away and race back to the hacienda. I knew then that he was going to summon Don Felix—"

"Yet you lay low and suffered your young mistress to fall into the snare!" bitterly cried Joaquin.

"I did what I could, *senor*," was the calm, almost dignified response. "I am but an old man, weak and with my senses dulled, but I stole forward to warn you—and failed. Pepe—may the devil make his bed in the hottest corner of his fire-place, and that right speedily! The cunning scoundrel must have had eyes in the back of his head, for he discovered my approach and leaping out on me from ambush, cracked my crown with a pistol butt before I could utter so much as a sound. And when I recovered my senses, Don Felix was already entering the *motte*."

"I ask your pardon, old friend," and bending over in the saddle, Joaquin grasped the veteran's hand.

"It was granted, *senor*, before you spoke," was the simple response. "I know how to make allowances. I was once young, myself—young and in love with an angel who also had an unreasonable and hard-hearted father—"

However interesting these reminiscences of a dead and gone past might have been to the gray-beard, Joaquin could not appreciate them at the present moment, and ruthlessly interrupted Tio Tomas:

"If Pepe the spy suspected your purpose, he will be watching you yet—then why this useless caution?"

A hard, almost ferocious look came into the old man's face, showing that the fires of his early days were not yet wholly extinguished.

"Pepe the spy had keen eyes, and his tongue was nimble as that of a snake; but just now he can neither see with the one nor speak with the other. When I left him, back yonder in the timber, he was quiet and harmless enough."

"You killed the fellow?" quickly demanded Murieta.

"I do not say that," was the evasive reply. "The coward struck me unawares, and it is my rule to pay my debts punctually—least of all do I forget or forgive a blow. I saw Don Felix leading away his daughter—Sanchez of the one eye did not return from the hacienda—but Pepe was still there. Before I left, he fell down—maybe he hurt himself, for I am almost sure I caught the red gleam of blood as I turned away to hasten after you."

With a short, hard laugh the old sinner concluded this significant recital. Joaquin was little disturbed by it, for he knew that Pepe was evil enough to deserve any punishment, and

his own affairs gave him ample food for thought and anxiety.

"No one else saw me in the timber, and unless I am seen in your company, *senor*, I can hardly be suspected of having any hand in the little accident that has befallen honest Pepe. And here is the cover—enter, *senor*; unless I mistake, I have something to say that will deeply interest you."

Joaquin rode into the timber, and as Tio Tomas seated himself on a fallen tree-trunk with the air of one whose budget cannot be shortly unfolded, the young Sonorian alighted and holding his horse by the bridle, seated himself beside his old friend.

"I am an old man, *senor*, and many people imagine that I am in my dotage, but it is barely possible that they are the fools, not Tio Tomas."

"No doubt, old friend, but I am pressed for time," a little impatiently interposed Joaquin. "Some other time I will gladly listen to you—but now; you have something of importance to communicate?"

"If you suffer me to follow my own trail—yes," pettishly cried the veteran. "How can I make all clear, or you understand, unless I begin at the beginning? If I had been blind, could I have seen how often you and the pretty little *senorita* met each other? If I had been a fool, could I have reasoned out the truth—that Don Manuel Camplido stood in great danger of losing his bride—that you loved Carmela and Carmela loved you? Never mind," with a deprecatory wave of the hand as Joaquin was about to speak. "You are in a great hurry. The oftener you interrupt me, the longer you will be detained. Let me hasten with what I have to say. And then, it may be as well for me to be at my quarters before snake-Pepe is missed."

"I have picked up several points of importance since I saw you last. One was that Don Felix had learned of what was going on between you and *Senorita* Carmela, through the spies set to work by Don Camplido; but of that you have had sufficient proof. As to the other item, I must ask you to pardon what may seem impudence in me before I go further."

"I believe you are my true friend, Tio Tomas, and pledge my word not to take offense at anything you may say."

"Good! now I can speak with a good grace. In the first place, do you love the *Senorita* Carmela?"

"Better than life—better than aught else in the wide world!" was the impulsive response, and the ardent light which beamed from the young Sonorian's eyes bore evidence to the truth of his words.

"I knew it—you would be either more or less than mortal man if such was not the case—but it is always best to be sure. And unless I am purblind, the little lady is inclined to smile upon your suit? You have confessed your passion; and she?"

"Only this evening, she uttered the words which I would gladly give my life to hear her breathe again!"

"You are easily satisfied—most men would rather live on in hopes of a still richer reward," dryly commented Tio Tomas. "But as I said before, I can make allowance—never mind: my love affairs are dead and gone, and I'll not trouble you to rake over the ashes with me."

"One more question: did the *senorita* speak of the journey she is about to take?"

"No. What do you mean?" and Joaquin looked anxious.

"That Don Felix, urged on by Don Camplido, has decided to put a safe distance between his daughter and the audacious young *vaquero*—meaning you, *senor*. No matter how I learned this, enough that my information may be depended upon. They set forth early in the morning, with an armed escort, bound for the hacienda of Don Felix's sister, two days' ride from here. Once immured there, you can imagine what little chance the dainty lady-bird will have of spreading her wings—or might imagine, had you ever seen that grim old griffin, her aunt—the saints forgive me if I do her wrong!"

Joaquin sat like one benumbed by a sudden blow. Tio Tomas eyed him for a moment in silence, then leaned forward and touched his arm as he resumed, impressively:

"There is nothing so bad but what it might be worse, and though there is not one chance in a thousand for you, after *Senorita* Carmela is once behind those doors, until then, you hold your fate and hers in your own hands, if you are the brave, cool-headed man I think you."

"What do you mean? Speak plainer," muttered Joaquin, but with a growing light in his dark eyes that seemed to give Tio Tomas a peculiar satisfaction.

"One moment, first. From the very first you reminded me of my Juanito—my only son, who was killed by the accursed Apaches when he was barely your age. In memory of him, I soon learned to love you, the more readily that I saw you were honest, brave and open-hearted. This is why I have taken such a deep interest in this love affair, and why I am now ready to play the traitor to my old master. But if I felt the faintest fear that you could ever prove ungrateful to her, I would rather cut off my right

hand than aid you. I know, too, that she loves you—that her heart is bound up in you, while she hates Camplido, whom they would force her to marry. That dog would break her heart in a month, and to cheat him is excuse enough for my playing Don Felix false."

"But your plan?" urged the impatient lover.

"Is so simple that I wonder you have not thought of it yourself. You know the country well. There are plenty of snug spots along the trail where an ambush might be successfully laid. If well-timed, there need be no bloodshed. One swift rush and the victory is yours. One word to the lady—the mention of a holy padre—and she will not weep her eyes out. You can find allies enough for the work, and to prevent unpleasant consequences, you can rig them out as Indians. Now, *senor*, what think you of my little plot?"

CHAPTER V.

AN IRATE BROTHER.

JOAQUIN made no immediate reply, but sat in silence, one hand supporting his chin, a deep brooding look in his dark eyes. Tio Tomas watched him closely, a shade of disappointment gradually deepening upon his weather-beaten countenance. Instead of this apathy, he had anticipated an eager enthusiasm that should carry all before it.

"The project hardly seems to require so much thought," he added, in a colder tone. "Yes or no, are both little words, and easily spoken by a bold man who knows his own mind. Either the idea is a good one or a bad—"

Joaquin roused himself with a faint smile at the injured tone in which the old man spoke.

"My answer would be quickly spoken, old friend, were I only as rich in friends as you seem to think. The notice is very short, and besides yourself, I can only think of two men on whom I could depend to serve me in such a delicate job."

"You must not count on me," hastily uttered the veteran. "I have put you on the trail which may or may not lead to your happiness, according to the use you make of the information, but I can do no more. I am ok—my days of youthful folly are past. Besides, I am one of the escort detailed by Don Luis."

Joaquin interrupted him with a short laugh.

"Never fear, Tio Tomas, you have done your share. No matter how the affair ends, remember that you have my gratitude for the good will you have shown. Good-by now, old friend. It may be forever, or it is barely possible that we may meet again when you least expect it."

A grim smile wrinkled the veteran's face, and laid bare his toothless gums as he too arose from the log. His still sinewy fingers closed upon the young Sonorian's hand in a firm gripe as he added:

"Don Luis is even more bitter against you than Don Felix, but from his choice of men for the escort, one could almost think him playing into your hand. With possibly one exception, he has selected the most cowardly and worthless fellows on the whole estate. One shot, or a single good war-whoop from ambush, would put to flight all those whom terror did not kill outright."

"And I have not much to fear from that exception," said Joaquin, with a cordial handshake. "I understand. But there is no time to waste if I am to accomplish aught. Good-by, once more. Some day I may be able to thank you for your kindness in a manner more agreeable to my wishes."

Vaulting into the saddle, he rode out of the timber, but scarcely had his horse made a dozen strides away from the cover, when Joaquin made a most disagreeable discovery.

Out on the plain he espied a single horseman trotting along, bent far over in the saddle with eyes fixed upon the ground as though engaged in reading a trail. And a second glance convinced Joaquin that this was exactly what the horseman was doing; more, that he was lifting the very trail made only a few minutes before by himself and Tio Tomas.

Sharply drawing rein, Joaquin was about to return to the friendly cover, intending to pass through it and then ride rapidly away before his ruse was discovered, for he recognized the distant trailer and knew that his object in thus seeking him could be no amicable one. But the thought came too late. The trailer raised his eyes, and, as though recognizing the young Sonorian, he abandoned the tracks he had been following and broke into a rapid gallop.

For one moment Joaquin hesitated, mentally debating whether he should await the coming of the horseman or wheel and ride away. He knew the powers of the animal he lusted, knew that he could easily distance the trailer, and prudence counseled him to do so; but then the red wale across his cheek smarted afresh, and a hard light flashed into his eyes.

"He is her brother—let me remember that—but I will not run from him like a cur that fears the lash," he muttered between his teeth, slackening his reins and riding quietly forward.

"Hold! halt one moment, *senor*!" cried Don Luis, urging his horse to greater speed, as though fearing the young Sonorian intended to elude him by flight.

Instantly Joaquin drew rein and faced the young man, his jaws firmly set, a cold, dangerous light in his eyes.

Don Luis was the eldest living child of Don Carillo Felix, only a little past his majority, though he looked much older, thanks to the wild and reckless life he had led.

Naturally endowed with more than ordinary graces of both mind and person, tall, handsome and high-spirited, it was an unlucky day for Don Luis when he first fell under the evil influence of Don Manuel Camplido, which occurred when he was a mere boy. Led on and encouraged by that arch-rascal, the young Spaniard plunged headlong into the worst of follies and dissipation, until now he was but the wreck of his former self, a gambler, drunkard and reckless libertine; even worse—a criminal whose life lay in the hands of his evil tutor.

"You wish to speak to me, señor?" coldly demanded Joaquin as Don Luis drew rein before him, so close that their horses' heads fairly touched each other.

"Would I have taken the trouble to halt you, else?" sharply retorted the young Spaniard, an ugly frown upon his face. "Your name is Joaquin Murieta, and you are a servant employed on the Santa Anna estate?"

A hot flush swept over the young Sonorian's face, more at the insolent tone than the words employed, but he bore in mind the fact that this was Carmela's brother, a quarrel with whom must be prejudicial to his hopes of eventually winning her hand.

"That is my name, señor."

"And rank—but let that pass for the present. I simply wish to say that you have been skulking around these premises quite long enough. More than that, you have had the sublime impudence to repeatedly annoy my sister, the Señora Carmela Felix, with waylaying her during her rides, presuming upon your having once rendered her a slight service. Because of that trifling service, you are given a civil warning, instead of that which your impudence deserves. If you are a wise man, you will not wait for a repetition, but leave this part of the country at once, before worse comes of it."

"Indeed! and may I ask what may be the alternative of refusal?" asked Joaquin, with a poorly disguised sneer.

"You will not be such a fool as to neglect this warning—you dare not!"

"I dare almost anything when in the humor," replied Joaquin, with a short, careless laugh.

The young Spaniard raised his whip-hand as though to strike, but Joaquin did not flinch, and there was a dangerous light in his brilliant eyes that warned Don Luis to think twice before he rushed to extremities. Instead, he hung the whip to the pommel of his saddle, thus leaving his right hand at liberty to grasp a more certain weapon.

"The alternative is easily spoken. If you dare to speak to my sister again, or even be seen lurking around this estate, I will set my servants upon you with dogs and quirts. This for the first offense. For the second—death!"

"Thank you for nothing!" retorted Joaquin. "You have had your say, and I have listened to you quietly. Now let me say a word in turn."

"I am a man, white and free born. My blood is as pure as that flowing in your veins, and as an honest man, I hold myself the equal of the proudest and highest of the human race. I saved the life of your sister. I love her, and only this day she confessed that my passion was fully reciprocated. While I draw the breath of life no other man shall wed her. As for you—you are her brother, and therefore your life is sacred to me; but do not press me too far—I give you the warning in a kindly spirit."

This speech flowed forth so fluently that Don Luis could not have interrupted its current even had he made the effort. But he was so amazed, so dumfounded by such audacity in a mere vaquero—one scarcely ranked above the humblest peons—that he could only stare with parted lips at the bold speaker, scarce able to believe the evidence of his ears, until, with a low bow, Joaquin passed him by.

It was an apparently careless move on the part of the young Sonorian, who knew his words must have stung Carmela's brother to the quick, but heedless as he seemed, the vaquero was never more perfectly on the alert. He hardly anticipated an assault, but he knew that Don Luis had long been an apt pupil of the treacherous Camplido, whose teachings had sadly warped a naturally generous and noble nature.

For one instant Don Luis gazed upon the vaquero, then, with a grating curse, his spurs were plunged rowel-deep into the flanks of his horse, and as the startled creature bore him alongside, he made a swift, spiteful blow, meaning to bury the long blade of his knife between Joaquin's shoulders. But impetuous as was his attack, it was utterly foiled by the wonderful quickness and dexterity displayed by the vaquero.

Swaying his body swiftly to one side, Joaquin evaded the stroke, then his sinewy fingers closed upon his assailant's wrist, and by a powerful twist the weapon was hurled from the now helpless hand. Don Luis was drawn close to his

adversary, and for a brief space they remained thus, their faces nearly touching, fierce contempt blazing in Joaquin's eyes. Then, with a short, hard laugh, he flung the hand from him, crying:

"You are her brother, and that makes your life safe—but beware! Though I care not to have your blood upon my hands, do not crowd me too hard, or—"

The sentence was never finished. Furious at being foiled, at being so unceremoniously handled by one younger and smaller than himself, Don Luis snatched his sword from its scabbard and savagely attacked the young Sonorian.

With wonderful rapidity Joaquin whirled his horse around and dashed past the young Spaniard, warding off the stroke leveled at him, with the barrel of his revolver. A dozen lengths away he drew rein, and as Don Luis, now fairly frothing at the mouth, wrenched his horse around and charged, up rose his pistol and spat forth an unerring bullet. A metallic clink and clatter—the highly tempered sword-blade flew in pieces, and Don Luis found himself unarmed, wholly at the mercy of him whom he had insulted and twice sought to kill. The trial was too much for his dissipation-weakened nerves, and pale as though already a corpse, he shrunk before the leveled weapon.

For the fraction of a minute Joaquin kept him covered by the frowning muzzle, then lowered and replaced the weapon, with a low, mocking laugh that cut to the quick, so full was it of utter scorn.

"Twice you have tried and failed, Don Luis Felix—beware the third time. If you force me to strike, I will strike to kill!"

These words he uttered as he brushed past the discomfited Spaniard, feeling assured that no other lesson would be needed at present; but he underestimated the bitter rancor with which the heart of Don Luis was filled. Openly defied, treated with the pitying, almost contemptuous forbearance one might exhibit toward a silly, passionate boy, and, worse than all, conscious of having betrayed positive fear, he forgot all else in a burning thirst for the heart's blood of this insolent vaquero. He had but one weapon remaining—the lasso neatly coiled at his saddle-bow—but in the hands of one as expert as himself in its use, this was far more to be dreaded by an enemy than either knife or sword.

There was no time for deliberation. He recognized the horse ridden by Joaquin, and knew that its speed was far superior to that of the animal he himself bestrode. Should his purpose be suspected, or his first cast fail—but it did not fail, and a yell of frantic exultation burst from his lips as he beheld the snaky coils settle fairly over the shoulders of the young Sonorian! Instantly he wheeled his horse, to pluck his enemy from the saddle—then a few more bounds, and there would be naught to fear from that mangled, disfigured mass of humanity.

Joaquin was taken wholly by surprise, his first intimation of his deadly peril being when the folds of the lasso passed before his face. Then it was that his lightning quickness of thought and action stood him in good stead. One instant's irresolution must have ended in his death. Already the well-greased noose was tightening as his hand bore heavily upon the powerful bit, lifting his snorting steed into the air and whirling him round on his hind feet—already he was being dragged from the saddle with a sensation of being cut in twain just above where his elbows were pinned to his ribs—but then a touch of the spurs, and the horrible strain was relieved!

Scarce one man in a thousand could have performed the feat, even if fully prepared and expecting the ordeal.

Don Luis felt the rope tighten, and another savage shout parted his lips as he turned his head to witness the downfall of the man he now hated so intensely. Instead, he beheld that wonderful maneuver—saw the man whom he had thrice essayed to murder, wheel and race swiftly toward him as he loosened the rope from around his body.

Again assailed by fear, he plied his spurs frantically, heading for the distant rancho, feeling the cold hand of death already grasping his heart-strings. Unarmed, he could only flee—yet had his belt bristled with weapons, he could hardly have found courage sufficient to use them against this man—this devil, rather!

For one moment his life hung trembling in the balance. Joaquin was thoroughly angered by these repeated attempts to assassinate him, and his revolver covered the heart of the fugitive—but only for a moment. Then the pale, tear-stained face of Carmela Felix seemed to rise between them, and he even fancied he could hear her trembling voice pleading for the life of her only brother.

"Once more I'll spare him, but I'll read the craven cur a lesson which he will not soon forget!" he muttered, lowering the weapon and bending sharply to the left, keeping the rope taut as he gained upon the fugitive, by this means pinning the young Spaniard fast in his saddle.

As he felt the pressure on his thigh, Don Luis

looked around, and fresh horror seized upon him. He believed Joaquin meant to ride around him and thus secure a fold of the lasso about his body, then halt his horse and crush the life out of him, even if the terrible cord did not literally cut his carcass in twain!

In vain he sought to free the lasso from the pommel of his saddle. Joaquin kept it stretched tight, and he had no weapon by which the strands could be cut. Nor could he throw himself out of the saddle. One thigh was held fast, and slowly but surely that terrible pressure was creeping around his back! He thought of checking his horse, and even tightened the reins with that intention, but fortunately he realized the frightful result which must surely follow—both horse and rider would be overthrown, and even should he escape being crushed by the fall, his limb would be broken and mangled, perhaps torn off.

Truly the proud youth was being read a terrible lesson!

Joaquin was watching him closely, and noting the foolish motion, instantly changed his tactics, for now that the first moment of rage was spent, he felt no desire to either kill or cripple his adversary. Heading directly for Don Luis, drawing in the lasso hand over hand and thus still holding him helpless, he soon reached the other, and grasping the bits, checked both horses. Dropping the lasso and drawing a revolver he spoke, stern and sharp:

"Three times within half an hour you have tried to kill me, Don Luis Felix. I have a three-fold claim on your life, now, and you live only by my mercy. But for your sister, pure as you are evil, I would slay you like a mad wolf; for her sake, I spare your life, but will give you a token to remember this day!"

As he concluded, his pistol exploded, cutting off the lobe of the young Spaniard's right ear neatly as though with a knife!

Then, bowing low, Joaquin turned and galloped swiftly away.

CHAPTER VI.

A BITTER PILL TO SWALLOW.

THE day was hot and sultry, the air close and oppressive even under the grateful shade afforded by the clump of trees which had sprung up around the little way-side spring.

Horses were tethered around the edge of the little timber island where they should crop the scanty growth of grass. Scattered here and there within the shade lolled armed men, drowsy, listless, smoking their cigars, interchanging now and then a low, drawing remark, but for the most part feeling too lazy to maintain a conversation.

Near the center of the grove the spring bubbled up, surrounded by a carpet of thick, green grass. Here two persons were seated—male and female—father and daughter—Don Carillo Felix and Carmela.

The maiden had rolled a cigar for her parent, and now she was forming another for her own use. Don Felix beckoned to an attendant—none other than our old friend, Tio Tomas—who immediately produced a split stick with a living coal glowing in the cleft end.

"You can go now," coldly said Carmela as she tossed the primitive cigar lighter aside after igniting her tiny roll. "When you are needed, I will call."

Tio Tomas bowed low, then beat a retreat.

Don Felix cast a quick glance at the maiden from under cover of his shaggy white brows, and then the furrows grew deeper on his forehead, for he knew from experience that the fair rebel was about to broach a disagreeable subject.

Carmela was paler than usual, and there were dark shadows under her eyes that told of mental anxiety and sleeplessness. There had been a stormy interview between the two, after that exciting episode of the past evening, resulting in positive victory for neither. For the first time in her life, Carmela had dared to show open rebellion against the will of her father. Don Felix had managed to silence her then, but he saw now that the battle was all to be fought over again.

"Father, you are undergoing all this toil and trouble for nothing," the maiden began, abruptly. "My heart will change no sooner at my aunt's house than at home."

"At least you will be where watchful care can guard against your disgracing not only yourself but the proud race from which you sprung," was the cold retort.

A vivid flush overspread Carmela's cheek, and a prouder light came into her dark eyes.

"Disgrace will never come to the name of Felix through aught that I do—would that I could say as much for all that bear the name!"

"What do you mean?" sternly demanded the Spaniard, but his growing pallor told only too plainly that he divined her meaning, and Carmela ignored the question.

"Twice have you accused me of disgracing the name I bear—and why? Because I have dared to love one who loves me in return—a man who risked his life to preserve mine, when he knew not whether I was proudly or low-born—it might even be a slave. And what can be said against him? Nothing worse than that

he is at present filling a lowly position, more through choice than necessity."

"Enough—the matter was closed last night," coldly said Don Felix. "There is nothing more to say on the subject."

"Yes, there is this much to say," cried Carmela, in a low, but intense tone of voice. "I will go down to my grave a virgin unless I can wed the man of my choice. Either death or Joaquin Murieta will be my bridegroom!"

"There is no choice between the two. Dear as you are to my heart, Carmela, I could rather see you robed for the grave. There would be sorrow, deep and lasting, but there would be no feeling of shame, no bitter necessity for erasing even your memory from an aching heart."

"Yet you are willing and even eager to see me the wife of Manuel Camplido," bitterly cried the maiden.

The old man's face flushed hotly, then the color died away, leaving him more pale than before.

"Not eager, only willing," he stammered. "Have I ever urged you—ever exerted my authority?"

"And why? shall I tell you? Because, deep down in your heart of hearts you feel that such an unholy alliance would be a disgrace. Only to avoid a still deeper disgrace could you have given your consent."

"Stop! speak not the words!" cried Don Felix, terribly agitated. "What know you—who has dared to tell—"

His emotion choked him. He leaned back against the tree-trunk, gasping for breath. Carmela filled a cup with water from the spring and handed him. He drank, and when he was more calm, Carmela spoke.

"I know all. No matter how I learned the truth, but I knew it all before you suspected the bitter shame. I knew not then that I had a heart, and to save Luis, I consented to sacrifice myself. I saw that Manuel Camplido was welcomed in good society, made much of and flattered by those high in power, despite the well-known fact of his poltroonery displayed on the field of battle, of his being a heartless *roue* and a confirmed gambler. I did not know then what love was, and foolishly thought that I could endure an existence with him where so much was at stake. But now—if forced to become his bride, I should first slay him and then kill myself!"

Before Don Felix could make reply to this passionate outburst, the rapid clattering of a horse's hoofs in swift gallop came to their ears, and through an opening in the foliage they caught a momentary glimpse of the rider, who was headed for the *motte*. The eyes of hatred, no less than those of love, are very keen, and Carmela's dainty brows contracted as she recognized the horseman.

"Talk of Satan! if not the foul fiend himself, yonder comes his favorite lieutenant, Manuel Camplido!"

"Treat him kindly, daughter. Remember how much depends upon his good will!" hurriedly whispered Don Felix.

It was very seldom that the proud don stooped to entreat where he was wont to command, and Carmela knew from this how powerfully he had been affected by her words. She gathered fresh courage, and inwardly resolved to carry the war into the enemy's country.

Little suspecting the nature of the reception which was being prepared for him, Don Manuel Camplido dismounted, and turning his horse over to the care of one of the escort, hastened to the spring where father and daughter awaited his approach.

The welcome given him by Don Carillo was all that the most exacting could wish for, but Carmela only bowed coldly, not noticing the hand he extended to clasp hers, then turned away and resumed her seat, carelessly toying with the grass blades beside the water.

A quick frown wrinkled Camplido's brow, and insensibly the rebuff gave a sharper tone to his voice than he intended.

"You must pardon my intrusion, Don Felix," he said, seating himself. "Late last night a message came to me from the city—a summons that can only be answered in person, and of a nature that may compel me to start for Spain at a moment's notice. I rode over to your house the first thing this morning, but you had already started on your journey, so there was nothing left for me but to follow."

Don Felix bowed, but said nothing. Deep down in his heart was a sincere regret that Camplido could have found time even for this brief delay.

Camplido eyed him keenly, then added, in a colder tone:

"You surely can guess why I have stolen this time—why I was so determined to see you before leaving for Mexico?"

"To make your adieux—you are very kind," muttered Don Felix, scarce conscious of what he said.

"That, of course, but only in addition to more important business. As I hinted, I may be called to Spain almost immediately, and there is no guessing how long I may be detained there. The voyage will be a pleasant one, and a more appropriate wedding-tour could scarcely

be devised. I have been very patient, as even you must admit, and think I have fairly earned the right to ask when will the *Senorita Carmela* make me the happiest of mortals by suffering me to wed her?"

"Never, Don Manuel Camplido!" came in quiet but resolute tones from the maiden, who barely deigned to turn her dark eyes upon the fellow—eyes that emphasized the scorn and dislike that curled her ruby-red lip.

The gambler flushed hotly as he met that glance, but as he read the unpleasant truth thus conveyed, the blood fled back, leaving his face a sickly, ashen gray, relieved only by the ugly fire that blazed in his eyes.

"You are pleased to jest, *senorita*," he said, slowly, as though he found trouble in managing his voice. "You surely could not have understood me. You are my betrothed. I am on the eve of leaving this country for an uncertain length of time—it may only be months, or it may be for years. Is it to be wondered at that I am anxious to have all settled before I depart?"

"That point need not trouble you long. One word will settle it forever, so far as you are concerned. Take your departure as soon as you please—"

"Carmela!" exclaimed Don Felix, appealingly.

"Do not interrupt me, father," cried the maiden, impetuously, arising to her feet. "You heard him say that he was anxious for a settlement—and I am even more impatient than he."

"Don Manuel Camplido, you know that I refused your suit, not once but many times, only yielding when you threatened revenge such as no man with a spark of honor in his composition could even have dreamed of, but through it all, I never professed to love you, never even tried to disguise my aversion. I thought then that I could make the sacrifice, because I did not then know my heart—scarcely knew that I had one. But one day it awoke—bah! why should I fear to utter what I glory in! I learned to love—"

"That accursed hound, Murieta!"

"That nature's nobleman, whom you are unworthy to name!" spiritedly cried the maiden, her countenance aglow with a generous love for the absent. "You dare to curse him, now that he is distant, but your tongue ran not so freely yester evening!"

The taunt was a bitter one and struck heavily home. A sickly smile curled the villain's mustaches, but he could not articulate a word, and Carmela, anxious to end a scene which she saw was inexpressibly painful to her father, added rapidly:

"Once for all, let me tell you that I will never wed with you. Death, preceded by the most atrocious tortures, would be ten thousand times preferable. If you are cowardly enough to attempt putting your former threat into execution, settle your worldly affairs before you launch the thunderbolt, for truly as God reigns in the heavens above! your life will not last long enough for you to triumph over the downfall of the house of Felix!"

Delivering this speech with a fire that is but poorly represented by the words as recorded, Carmela turned haughtily aside and passed deeper into the wood.

Pale and ghastly, Manuel Camplido followed her with his eyes—eyes that each contained a raging devil—until the undergrowth intervened, then turned to the agitated father, with a short, harsh laugh.

"A tempest in a tea-pot, truly! However, it will soon expend itself. When one of the dainty creatures flies into a rage, the wisest way is to let them have their say out, and not make a bad matter worse by attempting to argue the point with them. But, with a man of the world, like yourself, *senor*, the case is different, and so I repeat my question:—how soon shall the wedding come off?"

"You heard her answer," muttered Don Felix, uneasily.

"But I do not choose to accept it, *senor*," a little sharply. "What a girl says in a fit of petty spleen goes for nothing. She is my betrothed, solemnly plighted to me, and I do not propose to relinquish my rights for a mere whim."

"Carmela was in bitter earnest; you must have seen that. She will never consent."

"It is not her consent that I am seeking, but yours," coldly, almost insolently retorted Camplido. "You have but to exert your paternal authority, and she must yield."

Don Felix flushed hotly, and despite the magnitude of the stake they were playing for, his indignation got the upper hand of his prudence.

"My authority shall never be exercised in that shape, let the consequence be what it will. If you can gain her free consent to marry you, my blessing will be given you both; but no compulsion shall be used, and any further hint on that score from you, *senor*, will be esteemed as an insult by me, to be resented accordingly."

Camplido gazed steadily into the eyes of the proud old don as he spoke, but the haughty blood of the *conquistadores* was now fully aroused, and Don Felix faced the ex-captain of

lancers unflinchingly. Then a harsh, unnatural laugh parted Don Manuel's lips.

"Doubtless you have well weighed your words and fully counted the cost, *senor*, but I will not hastily accept your answer. In a few days I will return from the city, and then will do myself the honor of calling on you. Until then, *adios, senor!*"

Turning away, Don Camplido mounted his horse and rode swiftly away from the *motte*.

"Ten thousand curses on the punctilious old fool!" he snarled, as he glanced over his shoulder and saw that only the extreme tops of the trees forming the timber island were in view.

"Had his heart been only half in the scheme, he would have exerted his authority quickly enough, and never have given it a second thought."

Wrenching savagely at the bit, he wheeled his horse at a sharp angle, and plying spurs, galloped swiftly on.

"Bah! what matters, after all? The other way is the shortest and easiest, besides giving me a good chance of killing two birds with one stone—winning a peerless bride, and forever ridding myself of a dangerous rival. Ha! ha! could dainty Carmela have known the whole truth, would she not have sung smaller?"

Long and loud this reckless villain laughed, his tones, his face, and above all the light in his eyes, being those of a veritable demon.

At length he drew rein and leaped to the ground, tearing up the withered grass and placing it in three piles, after a careful glance at the position of the sun. He struck a match on his boot sole, and touched off the three piles of grass in succession, laughing once more as he stood with folded arms and watched the smoke curl upward in three columns.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT THE SMOKE SIGNALS MEANT.

THE rejected suitor had hardly left the timber island before Don Felix called up Tio Tomas and bade him get all in readiness for a resumption of the journey. The veteran retainer received his orders in silence, bowed and withdrew to at once carry them out, but there was a shrewd, humorous twinkle in his eyes that told he was not wholly at a loss to understand why Don Felix had abandoned his purpose of remaining in camp by the spring until the heat of the day was past. An ardent partisan of the young Sonorian, Tio Tomas had not been over particular to keep beyond ear-shot of the spring, and the angry frown worn by Don Manuel Camplido when he hastened from the *motte* was no enigma to him.

"Don Felix looks as though his dinner did not agree with his stomach!" muttered the veteran, chuckling in his sleeve. "Glory to the dainty little lady-bird, and the Virgin grant she may have back-bone enough to hold fast to the position she has taken!"

Carmela also had an idea of the truth, for she believed their departure was being hastened to avoid any further discussion of the troublesome point, and while she raised no objection to abandoning the grateful shade of the *motte*, she inwardly resolved that this unexpected change of base should not avail her father aught. And scarcely had the cavalcade cleared the timber island before she opened her batteries, showing the already demoralized enemy no mercy.

"I remember hearing a proverb fall from your lips, long years ago, father," she began, leaning forward with a charming smile and stroking the smooth neck of the horse he bestrode. "It ran like this: A true gentleman never forgets the respect and reverence due to venerable age or beauty. Weighed in this balance, your friend, Don Manuel Camplido, this day proved woefully lacking."

"He is no friend of mine!" hastily uttered Don Felix, then paused abruptly and flushed hotly as though conscious of having made a damaging admission.

Carmela averted her head to conceal a smile of gratified triumph, for this success was more than she had even dared to hope for, and she began to feel that complete victory lay in the path she was following, if she could only patiently bide her time and avoid making any false move. Yet she could not resist the temptation to use the caustic once more.

"I rejoice greatly at hearing you say that, dear father, for the friendship of such a thorough-paced villain would disgrace any man with even the slightest pretensions to respectability. You have not heard of the part he played quite recently at General Santa Anna's rancho? I thought not, yet you should, for it showed doughty ex-captain of lancers up in his true colors. Tio Tomas, come hither!" she said, turning and beckoning to the veteran, who had been riding close behind them, then adding as the old man respectfully bared his head in the presence of his master: "Cover yourself, Tomas, then tell us what you know concerning this affair between Don Manuel Camplido and—I forget his name, but that does not matter; the facts are all we care for at present."

There was no need of the quick, warning look which flashed from her eyes. Tio Tomas was no fool, and her cunningly chosen words gave him the necessary clew.

Though not an eye-witness of the affair, he had received an accurate report of it from beginning to end, and without mentioning Joaquin by name or otherwise giving any certain clue to his identity, he painted a graphic picture of the events already placed before the reader.

In his earlier days, Don Carillo Felix had been celebrated for his skill in horsemanship, his prowess as an athlete, nor had old age entirely chilled his enthusiasm as a cavalier. His eyes glowed, his cheeks grew flushed and his tall form grew more erect as he listened to the wonderful display made by the unknown. He was eager to learn the name of the man, for, strange so say, he never once suspected the truth.

"That is a man, and one, too, in whose veins no ignoble blood flows, else nature has greatly belied itself!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically. "This strange you have forgotten his name. Possibly some of the escort know it. Ask them and ascertain."

"Surely I will remember the name in a moment," hastily replied Tio Tomas. "I can almost speak it—'tis upon the very end of my tongue. But of this I am sure, Don Felix—your good judgment has not misled you here, for the young man who covered Don Manuel Camplido with confusion and shame belongs to one of the proudest and purest blooded families in all Sonora. Possibly they may not be the richest, but at all events they have wealth enough to guard against the necessity of this young gentleman's following such a humble life. They say he became a vaquero that he might be better able to care for his own herds when his father dies—"

For several moments Carmela had been trying to catch the garrulous old man's eye, but in vain. She noticed a look of suspicion deepening on Don Felix's face, and saw that the favorable impression made upon his mind was being shaken. In desperation, she caused her horse to cavort and plunge violently against that ridden by Tio Tomas, cutting short his speech and nearly overturning him into the bargain. But the mischief was done, and the voice of her parent was cold and measured as he turned upon her.

"Tell me the name of this person whom you two have been so extravagantly praising, Carmela. No evasion—you know it only too well."

"And am proud to utter it, too!" she exclaimed, spiritedly. "The gentleman in whose veins you so positively declared that no ignoble blood could flow is Don Joaquin Murieta."

"Unless nature greatly belied herself, I added," was the cold comment. "That she does this occasionally is proved by my daughter plotting with a foolish old servant to blindfold her father and entrap him into giving a false opinion. As for you, Tio Tomas, fall back to the rear, and hold yourself truly fortunate in escaping with my displeasure alone," he added, severely.

The old man bowed low and retreated, yet not wholly dissatisfied with the result of his bold venture.

"Let him frown and sulk now," he muttered behind his beard, "but the good seed sown has taken root and will bear fruit in time. Old I may be, but not foolish—no, no! Joaquin will bear evidence to the contrary when he is the husband of Senorita Carmela, and the master of—Holy Mother of Mercy! I forgot the advice I gave him!"

By the merest chance Tio Tomas had turned his head and caught sight of the three columns of smoke sent up by Don Manuel Camplido. The regular arrangement of the signals forbade the idea of its being the work of chance, and the old man instantly jumped to the conclusion that it was connected with the advice he had given Joaquin Murieta.

The discovery had come so unexpectedly that he gave a great start, and his nearest companion, following the direction of his gaze, also noted the sinister appearance.

"How do you read that sign, uncle?" he muttered, with an air of uneasiness that deepened as the veteran slowly shook his head. "You think it bodes danger to us?"

"Who knows? 'Tis not now the time of the Mexican Moon, but the red devils do not always strike by rule. It may be that they have set a trap for us—they or the whiter-skinned but even blacker-hearted *salteadores*. In my day I have fought them both, and plunged headlong into the thickest of the fight, like a bridegroom rushing to the arms of his new-made bride—but then there were no women along. Now, I could wish that we were all safely at one end or the other of this journey!"

"Bah! you are too fond of the sound of your own voice, Tio Tomas," rudely exclaimed Gomez, the leader of the escort. "You are making a mountain out of a mole-hill—as Indian say out of a vaquero's camp-fire. Say no more, and beware lest you arouse the fears of Senorita Carmela."

But the mischief was already wrought. Don Felix noticed the slight confusion among his men, and in seeking the cause, he caught sight of the three smoke pillars, now dying away at

the base. Instantly halting, he summoned Gomez to his side and questioned him.

"I am quite sure there is no cause for alarm, senor," the fellow said, respectfully but with the confidence of a man wholly at ease. "'Tis too early for Indians this low down, and the white thieves would not care to molest us. If yonder smoke be the work of a spy, be sure its meaning is to open, rather than to close the way, for we bear no plunder of any amount, and the *ladrones* do not stomach hard blows unless there is an abundance of pay before their eyes."

Don Felix was somewhat reassured by this plausible line of reasoning, but still he was too old a soldier to neglect all reasonable precautions, and by his orders, Gomez sent two men ahead to explore the way.

This was a sensible move, for now the cavalcade had left the level, sandy plain behind them, and were entering upon a region of far different nature. In the distance rose high, rocky and frowning hills. Around them the ground grew more and more broken, huge boulders and masses of rock were scattered thickly on every hand, while here and there grew monstrous cacti in fantastic shapes, with an occasional clump of shrubbery, where a considerable force of armed and even mounted men might lie hidden in ambush all unsuspected by their hapless victims until fairly in the toils.

Tio Tomas edged closer to his fair mistress, the fires of a long-vanished youth glaring in his eyes, reanimated by a suspicion of what the near future contained. He felt sure that Joaquin had concluded to act upon his advice, and keenly eyed each favorable cover as they neared it, expecting to see the ambush sprung with the passage of each moment.

But steadily on the advance scouts ride and give no sign. He knows them to be cowards, but the boldest of all warriors might have envied their intrepid bearing now, and a strange suspicion flashed across the veteran's mind, only to be dismissed the next moment as untenable.

"They are tools of and friendly to the interests of Don Luis and Manuel Camplido—consequently his bitter enemies. Besides, Joaquin could not have tampered with them after he left me, last night."

The worthy veteran was thoroughly puzzled, but not for long.

The trail led directly through the heart of a spot favorable in every respect for the formation of an ambush. The two scouts advanced without giving any warning, seemingly unsuspecting of danger, but when the cavalcade was fairly involved, a chorus of hideous yells rent the air, a blinding volley of flame-tinged smoke burst out from every side, and then a horde of paint-bedaubed, plumed savages burst from ambush upon their prey.

A scene of the most frightful confusion ensued.

Full one-half of the escort went down before the first volley, among them the two scouts and Tio Tomas, while the rest were thrown into utter dismay and seemed to think only of flight.

The enemy, though dismounted when they opened fire, leaped upon their horses when they charged, and at once closed around Don Felix and Carmela, neither of whom had been touched by the first volley. Indeed, it seemed to be the aim of the savages to capture at least those two, alive and unharmed, but they reckoned without their host in this instance.

In his earlier days, Don Felix had been a noted warrior, and now, in his old age, he did not belie his ancient reputation. As by magic all of his youthful energy returned.

Quick as thought a pistol was out and thrust almost into the face of a brawny warrior who had grasped his bridle reins. At its explosion, the savage fell, half of his face shot away, and as though awe-stricken by this horrible sight, his comrades flinched and involuntarily fell back. Another shot followed, and then hurling the empty pistols into the midst of his enemies, Don Felix drew his good sword and reached the side of Carmela, who had been separated from his side by the mad rush.

"Courage, child!" and his voice rung out clear and defiant as the blare of a trumpet. "Keep close to my side, and we will cheat these painted heathens yet!"

Even as he spoke, a paint-bedaubed savage made a quick clutch at his bridle-rein, but like a beam of light, the gleaming sword swept through the air, and the sinewy hand, clean severed at the wrist, hung dangling a moment from the reins ere it fell to the ground.

A howl of mingled agony and fury burst from the mutilated warrior, but Don Felix heeded him not, turning to the left to dispose of another assailant, who was desperately striving to drag him from the saddle.

For the first few moments Carmela was utterly bewildered by the bursting of the ambushade, but as she saw the maimed savage draw a revolver with his left hand and thrust it almost against the back of Don Felix, a cry of horror burst from her lips and she urged her horse against that of the red-skin, at the same time drawing a revolver and sending ball after ball into his naked body.

Swift as had been her action, it could not entirely save Don Felix, though through it his life was preserved. Instead of piercing his lungs, the Indian's lead only tore through the muscles of his shoulder, and though the old hero flinched visibly on feeling the lead, he was not disabled.

All this had occurred almost with the rapidity of thought, and before the main body of the savages could recover from the surprise of this deadly resistance, father and daughter, side by side, wheeled and charged straight through them, saber gleaming, revolver flashing—and then sped swiftly away along the back trail!

"After them! Thousand devils! they must not escape us now!" thundered a squat, heavy-set rascal in good Spanish. "Kill or cripple the horses—take the girl alive, the old man either dead or living."

Either his voice lent them courage, or else it was the sight of the terrible old man now fleeing, for, with loud yells of fury, the painted demons urged their animals on in swift pursuit, their fire-arms speaking at every bound.

"You are hurt, father—I fear you are slain!" gasped Carmela, as she noted the red stream that flowed from the wound inflicted by the savage whom she had slain, but the voice of the gallant old hero gave no token of weakness as he replied:

"'Tis only a scratch, such as one might make with a bodkin; but you, darling?" and a look of terror came into his eyes as he noted a red blotch upon the bosom of her white dress.

"Unharméd; it came from the hand of the brute you cut off—the same who shot you, in spite of my efforts to prevent it. Thanks to the Blessed Virgin! he will never more do harm on earth!" and the stern spirit which characterized her fiery race gleamed in her dark eyes.

"If we were only on the level ground once more there would be hope," and Don Felix scowled as he rode for a moment with beard on shoulder, noting the oncoming enemy. "See how the thrice accursed heathen fire! And a chance shot may make all the difference between life and death!"

It was not for himself that he feared, for a more dauntless heart never throbbed in mortal bosom. He knew how horrible was the fate of all unfortunate women who fell alive into the power of the Apaches. And while he prayed to escape those fiends, he also prayed that his poor child might be slain outright in preference to being taken captive.

It was a mad, reckless race. There was no time to pick and choose. To hesitate meant death or worse. They could only dash along the winding, difficult trail and hope against hope that neither of their horses might stumble and fall or be struck by one of the bullets that hissed and hurtled past them on every side. A race such as few persons are ever forced to make and fewer still who live to tell of it. But the end came speedily.

Once more Don Felix was glancing back over his shoulder, while Carmela gazed ahead. Suddenly she caught a glimpse of a human head—a human form rising up from behind a rock close to the trail—a face and form which she instantly recognized, with an appealing shriek for aid. But her voice was blended with a shot that came from the leveled rifle of the man in front, and then, as though stricken by a thunderbolt, the horse ridden by Don Felix fell in a heap, casting its unprepared rider with fearful violence upon the rocks!

CHAPTER VIII.

THROWING ASIDE THE MASK.

In that one brief instant, Carmela Felix lived through an eternity of torture. She saw the horse ridden by her father stumble and fall, casting its rider far over its head with a sickening violence upon the stones—she saw him lying there like a dead man, and even caught sight of the blood that was dyeing his white hair crimson. A shriek of heart-rending grief welled from her bosom, and wrenching in her horse, she leaped to the ground. The next instant she was kneeling beside her father, forgetful of her own danger, with only room for thought of him.

Like one in a dream, Carmela was dimly conscious that a single horseman emerged from behind the rock, and with loud, fierce cries charged upon the enemy. She recognized both his voice and his war-cry, but never once did she glance up or around to notice him, but bent over that helpless figure, now pressing her cold lips to his, now striving to staunch the blood that flowed from his wounds, calling upon him in piteous tones to return to life, to her.

And yet it was truly a grand and blood-thrilling sight—one man charging at full speed upon nearly a score well-mounted and armed warriors, flushed with victory—utter madman, one would say, and yet, its very audacity seemed to compel success.

"A Camplido—a Camplido to the rescue!" Loud and menacing the defiant slogan rung out, and riding with reins hanging free, a revolver grasped by each hand, twin spots of flame-tinged smoke leaping from their muzzles at every bound made by the snorting horse, Don Manuel Camplido charged upon the enemy,

who were thrown into confusion by his sudden onset. Ah! could the stubborn traducers of the gallant ex-captain of lancers only have beheld him then, looking like a hero, a demi-god.

There was a brief hesitation on the part of the savages, but then, as though they felt assured that this foolhardy man must be heavily supported, they relinquished the prey their fingers were already closing upon and wheeled their animals in speedy flight.

More loudly shouts Camplido, and more furiously he urges on his horse in desperate pursuit. His weapons are still exploding, and now one, now another of the rearmost savages utters a yell of pain as they reel in their seats and bend heavily over upon the necks of their horses. Faster fall the heavy quirts of the fugitives, urging their ponies to swifter flight, but nearer draws the dread pursuer, and louder shouts the self-constituted avenger.

It is a pity that there are no eyes to note and admire this wonderful exhibition of prowess and gallantry, but Carmela Felix just then had no thoughts for aught else than her father, whose bleeding and dust-covered head was resting upon her lap. He had not spoken nor moved voluntarily since that terrible fall. Carmela could detect no pulse, no heart-throb, yet she would not believe him dead, and the twain formed a piteous tableau as she caressed him, brokenly uttering his name amid her sobs.

Thus she sat when Don Manuel Camplido relinquished the pursuit and more leisurely retraced his steps. In silence he approached her, dismounted and stood by her side. His face was pale and hard set. There was an uneasy, restless light in his dark eyes, and despite his strongly exerted will, there was a perceptible tremor in his voice as he addressed the grieving maiden.

"If you would suffer me to inspect his injuries, dear Carmela. It may be that he is only stunned by the fall, but it is barely possible that he has received serious injuries, which may prove fatal if not immediately attended to."

At the first sound of his voice the maiden shivered as though an icy cold blast had struck her, cowering and shrinking away from Don Manuel Camplido, with a look of unutterable horror and aversion upon her pale face. But this was only for a moment. Then she gently raised the blood-stained head from her lap, lowering it to the ground with almost reverential care. There was a strange look upon her face as she arose, which Don Manuel did not like, and he hastened to say:

"Dear senorita, words fail to express my sorrow. If I had only arrived a few moments sooner—"

"Stop, Don Manuel Camplido!" cried Carmela, her voice sounding harsh and strangely unnatural. "Do not add lies and foul hypocrisy to your crime—"

In turn he interrupted her, but she would not listen. Sharply her open palm came in contact with his lips, and he staggered back as though some strong man had struck him.

"Dog—liar—cowardly assassin! I saw you rise up in ambush to complete the foul work of your hired murderers. I saw at what you were aiming, and with your shot my poor father fell. His blood is upon your soul, but as far as your worthless life can repay, I swear to avenge him—now and thus!"

Swift as thought, a slender, keen-pointed dagger leaped from her bosom and sought a sheath in his—driven by an arm nerved with the fury of despair.

But her words had told Camplido that he was discovered, and in a measure prepared him for the desperate assault. By a swift, sidelong twist of his body, he eluded the steel, and before Carmela could repeat the blow, his fingers closed upon her wrist and the weapon was wrested from her fingers.

"Are you mad, girl?" he cried, sternly, his other arm winding itself about her waist, and holding her helpless, despite her frantic struggles. "Would you slay your best friend—the only one that stands between you and the soul-sickening fate that awaits all of your sex that are unfortunate enough to fall into their power alive?"

Carmela made no reply. Her muscles relaxed and she sunk a lifeless weight upon his arms. Her overtaxed nerves had given way, and for the first time in her life, she fainted outright.

For one moment Camplido gazed down upon her pale face, the look of a veritable demon in his eyes, then his burning lips covered her face with hot, lustful kisses. At that moment the poor girl was in horrible peril, but then the villain uttered a short laugh and gently lowered her form to the ground. He was sure of his prey now, and would not brush the bloom off the grape prematurely.

Hastily searching her, Don Camplido satisfied himself that she was wholly unarmed, having lost her revolver after emptying it during that mad race for life.

Arising, he proceeded to scrape together a little pile of dried twigs and grass, then applied a match. The fire burned steadily and almost without smoke. Camplido knew that keen eyes would be on the look-out for this signal, but

to make all sure, he plucked a few green leaves and cast them on the blaze. Instantly the smoke darkened, and when the column floated upward for a few moments, he stamped out the remnant of fire.

Until now, the renegade had paid no particular attention to Don Felix, who looked so corpse-like that the idea of his still living had never once occurred to the assassin. But now he moved to where the old man lay, and bending over him, examined the body. A low, grating curse burst from his lips as he started back, for he could distinctly feel the veteran's heart throbbing beneath his hand.

Mechanically one hand fell upon the knife at his belt, and an ugly look crept into his eyes as he cast a swift glance around him, his pointed teeth revealed wolfishly. There was no one in sight save Carmela, and she had not yet recovered her senses. Slowly the deadly weapon slid from its sheath, and then hung suspended above the heart of the old man. But only for a moment; then Camplido rose erect with a low laugh.

"Bah! the old fool is nearly dead—he may never recover his consciousness, but if he should one of those fellows will not scruple to blow out the vital spark. And then—I would like him to know how I avenge myself. Ha! she is stirring."

With a faint moan, Carmela opened her eyes and made a motion to arise, but Don Camplido reached her side in time to frustrate the attempt.

"You must not exert yourself—you have been ill, my dear," he said, clasping her hands in his and holding them firmly. "I have done all that is possible at present, and have summoned aid. Be patient as possible till it comes."

"The wretches whom you hired to do this foul deed, no doubt," bitterly commented Carmela, all her courage returning.

"Then you insist on believing me in league with them?"

"I know it. I saw you aim at my father, and he fell at your shot. But even if I could disbelieve my eyesight, yet I would none the less know that those painted demons were your friends and allies. Doubly branded coward that the whole world knows you, you would never have dared charge upon a *real enemy* so boldly—"

Sharply the hand of the enraged villain came in contact with her mocking lips. Not that he meant to strike her, only to check the words that struck home to his black heart, but Carmela believed the contrary, and the insult lent her strength sufficient to avenge it.

Wresting her hands free, she snatched a revolver from his belt, thrust it fairly against his bosom, raising the hammer and pulling the trigger almost at the same motion. But fate was against her here, also. The hammer fell, but the cap failed to explode, and before she could turn the cylinder again, Camplido wrenched the weapon from her grasp.

His face was livid and ghastly as that of a corpse, while he trembled in every fiber, so thoroughly unnerved was he by his narrow escape from death. At that moment, had she been fairly herself, Carmela might have made her escape. A coward clear through, save where the odds were overwhelmingly on his side, Manuel Camplido could have been overcome by a child at that instant. But Carmela would not desert her father, even to save herself, and as a feeble moan broke from his blood-fringed lips, she flew to his side.

Don Manuel Camplido was thus given time to recover his natural assurance, and with a moody frown stood watching the maiden in her vain attempts to restore Don Felix to consciousness.

"Water—bring me some water, as you hope for mercy hereafter!" cried Carmela, turning her head. "Water, or he will die!"

A harsh, insulting laugh broke from the merciless villain.

"You can pray now that you need my help. Before, curses were good enough. Call me dear Manuel—say that you love me—and the water is yours, my rosebud!"

"Aid thus purchased would kill, not cure; and he would curse me for so debasing myself," spiritedly retorted Carmela.

Camplido laughed, but took a leathern water bottle from where it hung from his saddle, and handed it to the maiden.

"You are only wasting your pains, but have your will. The old gentleman has ridden his last race on earth. He will never open his eyes, never even recognize your voice—"

"And you are his murderer!" cried Carmela, chokingly, as she bathed her father's pale brow.

"Have it your own way, lady-bird. After all, why should I deny it? A solemn compact was made—he broke it. There was only one way to secure my rights, and that course I am following. I would have wooed and won you fairly, but you were obstinate. From the first I swore you should be mine, and mine you shall be!"

A glad cry broke from the maiden's lips, and she half arose to her feet as the clatter of horses' hoofs became audible. A strange light swept over her face—a glow that spoke of both hope and vengeance.

"Coward and assassin! *your race* is well-nigh run, for those men will avenge our wrongs—"

So far she spoke, but then broke off with a heart sick and sore, for instead of displaying fear or attempting to seek safety in flight, Don Manuel laughed mockingly, and she knew that he spoke the truth when he declared them his friends.

"Appeal to them, and see to whom they will turn before giving you an answer. At one word from my lips, those men would tear you limb from limb, and never change color. My will is theirs, my word their law!"

Carmela made no reply, but once more renewed her efforts to restore her father. Satisfied that she would make no attempt at escape which would necessitate the abandonment of her helpless parent, Camplido turned to the body of horsemen.

They were fewer in number than he had expected, and some of them bore traces of freshly inflicted wounds. A frown darkened his brow as he addressed the leader of the band.

"Did those cursed fools show fight—"

"Only the don and the lady—between them they laid out four of our number, and gave some others a few love tokens, as you can see," grimly replied the fellow, himself nursing a badly gashed arm. "We were taken by surprise, for who would have thought such an old fellow had it in him? I would as soon tackle a full grown jaguar with my naked hands!"

"He is past giving us any more trouble, but all through it is a bad piece of work. Those whom he killed must be disposed of with care. If one of their carcasses should be unearthed, there would be the devil to pay! Even as it is, suspicion may point at my door, and if one of my men be recognized—you understand?"

"I will fix it so that their own mothers could not recognize them, senor. Remember that my own throat is in danger. But about the senorita?"

"That is my affair. Be sure I will never loosen my grasp until I am certain that she will never lip the truth. As for the old man—he is not quite dead yet. I don't believe he could recover even with the most tender of care, but even if he should, it would not damage our case, since he had seen none of us save in disguise."

"You have not said all you wish," dryly uttered the outlaw, who had been watching Don Camplido closely while he spoke, and noted his peculiar uneasiness.

"You know—they are supposed to have been waylaid by the Indians?" muttered the renegade, still unable to utter his devilish meaning in plain words.

Gaspard laughed low, almost insolently.

"You can trust that to me. There shall not be a single loose joint in the evidence. When one takes life, what matters a trifle of hair? 'Tis only turning barber for the nonce!"

Don Camplido could not refrain from shuddering as he turned away from the cold-blooded wretch; and yet the latter was the superior of the twain, for he at least possessed courage.

Carmela was still devoting her whole attention to her father, and Camplido knew that she would not quietly submit to be removed, so he called two of the men aside and gave them their instructions in a whisper. A moment later a blanket was thrown over the head of the maiden from behind, and then, despite her struggles, her hands and feet were bound.

Don Manuel Camplido mounted his horse and received the helpless maiden in his arms, then rode away.

Gaspard ordered his men to follow, while he lingered behind to carry out the orders Don Camplido had feared to audibly utter. Almost immediately he took saddle and rode off after the rest.

As he overtook the head villain, he smiled grimly and for answer to the unspoken question, slightly opened his shirt.

A roll of blood-dabbled white hair was revealed.

CHAPTER IX.

CAUGHT NAPPING.

AFTER reading the arrogant young Spaniard, Don Luis Felix, a lesson that he would not be likely to forget as long as he drew the breath of life, Joaquin Murieta rode swiftly away from the spot through the gathering twilight.

His brain was whirling and confused by the conflicting thoughts born of the swift-following events of that afternoon. The voice of the cunning tempter still rung in his ears. His pulse beat high, his blood leaped more rapidly through his veins as he drew a mental picture of the bliss hinted at by old Tio Tomas.

"It could be done—one bold stroke, and heaven would be within my grasp!" fell almost unconsciously as he bared his fevered brow to the cool night air. "Carmela might frown for a moment at first, but then she understood all—when she realized that in boldness lay our only hope of bliss here on earth, then she would relent and smile upon me again. Together we would flee to the nearest holy padre. He would listen with a favorable ear to our story, and

then pronounce the words that make us one. Holy Mother of Mercy! the mere thought causes my brain to reel like that of a drunken man!"

He paid no attention to the course his horse was following, even when his brain grew cooler and his thoughts more collected. He was weighing the momentous problem and considering the chances for and against its success.

Finally a long-drawn sigh parted his lips as he drew himself erect and gathered up the reins in his hand.

"It is too late now, even if there was ever a hope. At best I could only count on two sure allies, and even they may be absent on a hunt. With their aid I might succeed, but the proud old don would stoutly resist such a small force, and there would be bloodshed. No, I will have patience and make one more attempt to gain his consent openly. After that—well, time enough to conjure up a remedy when the disease is fairly indicated. Ha! this will never do!"

Joaquin drew rein abruptly as his horse tossed its head and neighed shrilly, a quick response coming back from the gloom ahead, which the rising of the full moon was just beginning to dissipate. In an instant the cobwebs were brushed from his brain, and he was once more the cool, steel-nerved adventurer, equal to any and all emergencies.

A single rapid glance over his surroundings showed him what had occurred. Left to its own guidance, the horse he bestrode had made the best of its way back to its familiar quarters and that answering neigh had come from its fellow in one of Don Manuel's corrals.

Joaquin was in no mood just then for further fighting, and trusting that the neigh of his horse had not excited attention, he wheeled and rode away over the plain until the rancho and corrals belonging to his enemy were hidden from view.

Finally he drew rein and dismounted, after a moment's hesitation. It was a barren, desolate spot. Not a building, not a tree nor even a bush were in sight, while the sandy soil afforded sustenance to but a scanty growth of grass.

"Truly a cheerless bed-chamber!" he muttered, with a short, hard laugh. "But I can rest here more securely than under a roof-tree to-night. Camplido has too many unscrupulous tools, and hates me too bitterly for a bed to be a healthy sleeping place for me just now."

It was not the first time by many that the young centaur had waterless and supperless sought repose upon the hard earth, and with philosophical cheerfulness he staked out his horse to graze on the scanty herbage, then rolled himself in his blanket and lay down with his saddle for a pillow. But sleep was tardy in visiting his eyelids that night. He had so much matter for thought—so many events of moment had occurred that day. From what has been placed before the reader, the general drift of his musings may easily be imagined.

At length weariness of body conquered his busy brain, and Joaquin sunk into a profound sleep that would have lasted until daydawn, had he not been awakened by the loud, startled snort and quick trampling of his horse's hoofs.

Instantly he was wide awake, every sense on the full alert, cool and ready for any emergency, thanks to his early training in the school of danger. He did not leap to his feet, made no conspicuous move; only one hand glided to the butt of his revolver while his eyes from under his broad sombrero roved keenly around him.

A heavy cloud was slowly sailing across the face of the moon, but the light emitted by the twinkling stars was sufficient for him to see that Camplido's horse stood near him, its proud head erect, its distended nostrils quivering as though it scented danger in the air. Besides this, naught else could Joaquin discover unless—What was yonder dimly outlined shadow lying close to the earth's surface? He could recall no natural obstacle which had been there before he lay down to sleep—his cunning enemies were upon him!

Scarcely had this thought fashioned itself when it was dissipated by a long-drawn, lugubrious howl that came from the shadow, and Joaquin's tensely strained muscles relaxed.

"Bah! 'tis nothing more than a prowling wolf who thought to catch my good horse napping," he muttered, but the sagacious animal snorted again, and as it tossed its head, Joaquin saw that only a fragment of its lasso dangled from its neck.

Still he thought not of danger to himself, believing that the wolf in attacking the horse had caused it to break away, and he arose to cure the animal lest he be left afoot.

The frightened creature started back at his approach, and Joaquin followed, speaking softly and soothingly, intent only on recovering his mount. He saw not that the pretended wolf suddenly arose erect and sprang into rapid action—suspected nothing of the peril that threatened until, with an ominous *whish*, the noose of a lasso settled fairly around him, and with great force he was hurled to the ground!

The brain of a man like Joaquin Murieta works rapidly in an emergency, and scarcely had his body touched the earth before his keen knife flashed forth from its sheath and described a swift circle around his head. Then came a

sharp twang as the taut cord was severed, and an angry cry came from the gloom beyond.

Joaquin leaped to his feet like a panther, and faced in the direction from whence came the cry, but as he did so, heard a horse's hoofs thumping upon the sandy soil, and caught a glimpse of a horseman dashing straight for him, with the apparent intention of riding him down. He felt for a revolver as he faced this new foe, but before he could draw it, the deadly coils of another lasso fell about him, and with a yell of demoniac triumph the horseman wheeled and dashed away over the sandy plain.

Again the young Sonorian was hurled to the earth, but this time both arms were pinned close to his sides, and he was helpless. The noose tightened around his body until it seemed as though he was being cut in two, then he felt himself dragged swiftly over the ground at the heels of the flying horse—after which came insensibility.

But it was not the intention of his enemies to kill him then and thus, and ere the horse had taken a dozen leaps, its rider drew rein, but still kept the rope taut, one hand grasping the rope much as a fisherman fingers his line when he feels a fish nosing the bait. In obedience to his shout, the man who had so well played the part of a wolf, came running up and pounced upon the senseless body.

"I have him safe—slacken the rope!" he cried out.

"Careful!" warned Pedro Canales. "He is cunning as a fox and stronger than a mad bull!"

"He is quiet enough now, never fear," brutally laughed the other, as he arose from disarming the luckless Sonorian.

"Not dead? If we have so botched the job, you may carry the news to the captain, for I'll not venture within reach of his arm until he has first blown off steam!"

Canales rode up and alighted, bending over Joaquin with an anxiety not at all assumed. But this lasted only a moment. Laughing ferociously he produced a pair of handcuffs and rolling the body over on its face, fastened the young Sonorian's hands behind his back.

"All is well so far," he uttered, arising and rudely rolling Joaquin over with his foot. "We'll get him safe under cover and soon finger the reward Don Manuel offered for this game chicken. Go you and catch the master's horse, Jose."

As he spoke, Joaquin recovered his senses, and with an elastic bound regained his feet, but the noose of the lasso was still around his body, and leaping lightly backward, Pedro Canales gave a vigorous jerk to the rope, throwing Murieta heavily forward upon his face. The next instant a heavy foot was set upon Joaquin's neck, and the villain cried:

"Lie still, you dog! Attempt to rise and I will grind your face into the sand until there remains but little of the beauty you are so proud of. 'Twas your turn to-day—'tis mine now! You took me unawares, and lashed me like a sheep-killing cur. I swore revenge then, though it took a lifetime—even I did not think my opportunity would come so soon. But now—how do you relish a good dose of the medicine you dealt out to me so liberally?"

As he spoke the heavy rawhide quirt hissed through the air and fell with stinging force upon Murieta's shoulders. A muffled howl of fury came from the young Sonorian as he struggled to free himself, but Pedro Canales only bore the more heavily upon his neck, and plied the lash with all the force of his strong arm, laughing, cursing and railing all in the same breath.

Had he been left to wreak his furious hatred unchecked, the chances are that Joaquin would have died like a slave beneath the lash, but Jose came running up with the horse, and grasped the arm of his ferocious comrade.

"Are you crazy, man?" he cried, angrily. "The master said it would be double pay if we brought him in alive. I have an interest in this job, and unless you let up, I'll slip a knife between your ribs—you hear?"

Reluctantly the ruffian held his hand and removed his foot from the neck of the vaquero. Despite the terrible punishment he had received, Joaquin was not disabled, nor was his fiery spirit subdued. Rolling over, his eyes glowed like living coals in the clear moonlight as he glared defiantly up at his tormentor.

"Better make an end of the job while you have me foul, Pedro Canales!" he grated, his voice husky with the furious hatred that tore his heart. "Once free, I swear never to know rest until I have hunted you down, and made you suffer a death for every blow you dealt me!"

The ruffian laughed insolently as he tapped the sole of one dirty boot upon the lips of the vaquero.

"You will never be more free than you are at this moment, dog! Death's seal is already stamped on your forehead, and you can imagine the nature of the doom in store for you when I say that Don Manuel Camplido hired us to capture you—that he is now awaiting your coming. After he has satisfied his revenge, we poor devils will have little to dread from your vengeance."

"Too much talk," testily interposed Jose.

"We haven't got him to the rancho yet, and the devil only knows how much may happen between now and then."

"Bah! not even Satan himself can loosen my grip on the dog!" growled Canales, but none the less he set about making preparations for the journey with his captive.

He changed the noose of the lasso from around Joaquin's body to his throat, then kicked him rudely in the side.

"Get up, dog, unless you prefer being dragged to the rancho by the neck. Ha! your spirit is cooling?" he laughed mockingly as Murieta arose to his feet.

Joaquin made no reply, and he lowered the lids of his eyes to conceal the fire of deadly hatred that burned therein. He was wise enough to see that any present attempt to resist would only render his case more desperate, and though, at that moment, he would joyfully have given his own life in exchange for that of Pedro Canales, he did not care to make the sacrifice without the faintest hope of reward.

Jose watched the movements of his comrade with an air of disapproval that soon found utterance in words.

"There is a spare horse—better tie him in the saddle. It will be safer that way, and we will be the sooner at the rancho."

"The cursed hound shall never cross saddle again!" declared Pedro Canales with an ugly oath. "He shall walk to his doom—and like a condemned slave, a noose about his throat, led at my horse's tail. Ironed and unarmed, what can he do? But if you still have fears, ride at his heels. What I have said I mean, and all you can say will not alter my purpose," the burly ruffian growled as he leaped into the saddle.

Knowing that further expostulation would be worse than useless, Jose, riding his own animal and leading the horse Joaquin had taken from Don Manuel Camplido, followed on in the rear of his truculent comrade, keenly watching the captive.

Canales shortened the lasso until Joaquin was forced to keep close to his horse's heels to avoid being choked, and rode on toward the Camplido rancho, jeering his captive, uttering all the insults so foul a mind could conceive, now and then brutally jerking the lasso with cruel force.

Joaquin was already wrought to frenzy by the treatment he had received, and at length Canales pressed his insolence too far.

Collecting all his powers, Joaquin uttered a howl like that of an infuriated wild beast, and leaping forward he alighted astride the horse behind the astounded ruffian.

Joaquin's hands were helpless, but he fastened his strong teeth upon the throat of his brutal tormentor, making them meet in the flesh. The startled horse made a sidelong leap that unseated its double burden, then dashed away over the plain.

Snarling like some mad beast, Joaquin blindly tore at the throat of his enemy, who was screaming for help and vainly striving to beat off his assailant, when the lasso tightened and tore them asunder. The next instant the young Sonorian was being dragged over the plain by the noose around his throat!

CHAPTER X.

CAMPLIDO TRIUMPHANT.

JOSE, in common with more than one of those who had affected to scorn and look down upon the rather self-sufficient young vaquero, underwent a considerable change of opinion when he heard how Joaquin Murieta had defeated Don Manuel Camplido, and then "held the fort" against the others. Not that he hated Joaquin less, but respected his personal prowess more.

When Pedro Canales refused to make all sure by binding their prisoner in his saddle, Jose resolved not to lose his share of the reward through any carelessness or over-confidence, and rode close behind Joaquin, his lasso coiled ready for instant use in case an emergency should arise.

For all that, he was taken nearly as much by surprise as was Pedro Canales, when Joaquin made his wonderful leap and assailed that brutal rascal. For a moment he was too amazed to think of lifting a hand in defense of his comrade, but when they two fell to the ground together and the horse dashed away, he instantly realized the risk he ran of losing at least one half of his share of the reward offered by Don Manuel Camplido for the production of Joaquin Murieta, a living captive.

His spurs struck deep as he urged his horse forward, not to the rescue of Pedro Canales, who sent forth wild screams for aid against the human tiger whose strong teeth were tearing at his throat, but heading straight for the runaway mustang. For he knew that one end of the lasso was fastened to the pommel of the saddle vacated by Pedro Canales, while the other still encircled the throat of the young Sonorian.

Promptly as he acted, the lasso was drawn tight and the enemies plucked violently apart before the noose of his own lariat settled fairly over the head of the runaway.

Cowed by the touch of the well-remembered lasso, the horse stopped instantly, and Jose leaped from the saddle, bending over the dust-covered body of the young vaquero. His snarling curses were cut short by a glad oath as he found by examination that Joaquin's neck was still perfectly sound, so sure had he been that he would find it broken.

The young Sonorian was bruised and battered, choked into insensibility, but there was yet life in him.

Pedro Canales staggered to his feet, a frightful looking object in the clear moonlight. Brief time as he had been granted, Joaquin had made good use of the only weapons he could command, and it was as though some ferocious hound had been throttling the burly ruffian.

"I'll kill him—I'll cut his heart out and swallow it hot!" were the only words that could be distinguished amid a volley of horrible curses as he rushed toward the now helpless youth, with knife flashing venomously in the moonlight, but Jose boldly confronted him with leveled pistol.

"Back, you fool! back, or I'll split your thick skull with a half-ounce bullet! Do you think I'll stand by without a word while you throw five hundred good silver dollars to the devil? Half of that is mine, and the whole will be, unless you cool down and act more sensible."

There was no mistaking either his words or his actions, and Pedro Canales, even in the light of his madness, was sane enough to prefer life to death. He came to a pause before that grim persuader, and slowly replaced his knife.

"You are right, Jose—but the dog-of-a-devil's son so maddened me that I knew not fairly what I was doing."

"It was your own fault," shortly grunted Jose, not sorry to make the most of his advantage over the bumptious groom. "It is ill teasing a bloodhound with a full set of teeth. I warned you, but you were too bull-headed to take good advice. Now it will be as I say, at least until we reach the rancho. Bring up the horse and help me truss the game cock in the saddle."

Pedro Canales had been too severely shaken by his fall and narrow escape from death, to feel anxious for a fresh quarrel, and without a word he obeyed.

Joaquin was hoisted astride the deep-seated saddle; his ankles were tied beneath the horse's belly, his waist to the high pommel, and in addition a couple of turns of a lasso were taken around his body just beneath the armpits.

"There!" cried Jose, with an air of triumphant satisfaction, as he flung one end of the rope to Pedro Canales. "With you at one end and I hold of the other, twice the demon that he is could not give us the slip!"

Never was mortal being more completely hampered than the young Sonorian as the two kidnappers mounted their horses and moved off toward the Camplido rancho. Escape unaided was an absolute impossibility, and so Joaquin quickly convinced himself, when the swift forward motion completed the restoration begun while the vaqueros were arranging their complicated fetters.

Now, as before, he made no sign of returning consciousness until he had fully mastered the situation. He saw that it would be worse than folly to attempt a struggle now, and in silence collected his energies to take advantage of the first opening offered. But this did not come before the Camplido rancho was reached.

Drawing rein when near the irregular mass of buildings, Jose produced a heavy, sack-like hood of woolen stuff, which he drew over Joaquin's head and shoulders, tying it firmly in place.

"That will be enough," and Jose added, with a laugh: "The eye of love could not recognize him from the clothes he wears, for our dandy sport has turned to a scarecrow!"

"Cut his feet loose and help me down with him," growled Pedro Canales, thinking the time had come for him to resume the command. "So! Now go and see that the coast is reasonably clear. Don Manuel said that none other than we two must know the secret."

With a firm gripe on the shoulder of his prisoner, Pedro Canales forced Joaquin ahead of him. The great gate was passed, the threshold crossed, and then Jose, with a rude lamp, led the way down a flight of stone steps to a damp and foul smelling dungeon, into which the young Sonorian was thrust.

From the mildewed walls hung stout chains and shackles. Testing these, the kidnappers threw Joaquin down and applied the irons, then tore the muffler from his head.

"Who triumphs now, dog?" sneered Pedro Canales, as he stooped and spat full into the face of the helpless man. "In five minutes more your master will come. If you are wise you will make your peace with Heaven in that length of time—after, it will be too late!"

Joaquin made no reply, and with one more brutal kick, Pedro Canales suffered the impatient Jose to drag him away. The ironbound door closed behind them with a sullen clang, a heavy key grated in the rusty lock, and Joaquin

Murieta was left alone with his thoughts—gloomy and serious enough!

Together the two ruffians hastened to the private room of their master, knowing well that he would pardon their intrusion at that late hour for the sake of the glad tidings they bore.

Scarcely had their knuckles touched the door when it was flung open by Don Manuel Camplido in person, who, after one keen glance into their faces, stood aside to let them enter. Closing the door and turning the key to guard against surprise, the ex-captain confronted his tools, eagerness in his face and tones.

"What is the word—success or failure?" he demanded.

"You bade us search until we found Joaquin Murieta, and then to kill him or bring him back alive. Your will is law, and we have obeyed," somewhat theatrically answered Pedro.

"He is down in the dungeon, alive and awaiting your pleasure, Don Manuel," added Jose, who was resolved to play at least an equal part with his fellow.

A cry of delight broke from Don Camplido's lips—a look of ferocity leaped into his eyes. None who saw him then could have deemed him handsome. He looked all over what he really was—a heartless, brutal fiend in human shape, as he clutched Jose by the shoulder and cried:

"You speak the truth? Joaquin Murieta is here, a captive, alive, sensible to torture? Beware how you attempt to deceive me! If you lie, I will have you torn limb from limb!"

"Why should I lie, when the question is so readily settled?" quietly asked the vaquero, never flinching from that fiery glare. "Tis only a few steps to the hole where he lies."

But Don Manuel had not really doubted the man's word, and now, with a low laugh so devilish as to startle even those heartless ruffians, he released Jose, and producing an ample jug of brandy, bade them help themselves.

"You have earned your comfort, my fine fellows!" he exclaimed, moving restlessly about as though the welcome report had flooded his veins with quicksilver. "Drink hearty, and then tell me how it was. You had a fight?"

An angry curse met the strong liquor midway in Pedro's throat, and there was a sputtering, choking explosion. Amid his coughs and strangling, he pointed to his torn and still bleeding neck.

"He did that—after his hands were ironed behind him, and with a rope around his throat. He is ten thousand devils boiled down into one!"

A fit of coughing cut short his speech, and Jose, seeing his coveted chance, at once proceeded to make the most of it.

He told how luckily they were put upon the right scent. They heard and recognized the neigh of the horse which the young Sonorian had taken from Don Manuel, and they managed to keep him in sight as he beat a retreat, dogging him to where he lay down to spend the remainder of the night in sleep. Here they watched and waited until confident that his senses were fast locked in slumber; then he, Jose, stole forward to turn the horse loose, knowing that then the young vaquero would be wholly at their mercy. The horse broke away from him as he cut the rope, and its snorting aroused the sleeper.

There is no necessity of following Jose further in his report, since he confined himself strictly to the truth, and that has already been placed before the reader.

"You have done well," commented Don Manuel Camplido, "and have nobly won the gold I pledged. But one thing bear in mind; keep close tongues and never let fall a hint of this affair as you value your lives. I am playing a bold game for a large stake, and those who endanger my plans through treachery or carelessness, must pay the penalty."

"This much by way of warning," he added, in a very different tone of voice. "Who saw you bring him in here?"

"Only old Blas, the warder, and Agatone. Jose cleared the way of the rest," promptly replied Canales. "Even they could only guess who we had captive, thanks to the precautions we took."

"They are perfectly safe, and you have done well. Come, we will pay the gentleman a brief visit, or he may charge me with being an un-hospitable host."

The kidnappers obsequiously laughed at this little bit of pleasantry, and escorted their master to the dungeon.

Joaquin Murieta lay as they had left him, half-reclining against the damp wall. He raised his eyes as the door swung open, and deadly hatred glowed in them as he recognized his rival, but then his face set like a mask of steel. He readily divined the reason of this visit, and resolved to make Camplido's victory as barren as possible.

"Once more we meet, Senor Don Joaquin Murieta, and perhaps somewhat sooner than you anticipated," mockingly uttered Camplido, standing before his chained enemy. "Can you guess why you have been brought here?"

"So that you might wipe out the shame and disgrace with which I covered you this afternoon!" undauntedly cried the prisoner, his eyes ablaze with hatred and scorn. "You can face me boldly enough, now that I am shackled hand and foot, and weighted down with a mule load of iron. Bah! cowardly cur—I defy and spit upon you!"

Don Manuel Camplido only laughed, low and easily. He held all the trump cards. He could afford to bide his time.

"Make what use of your tongue that best pleases you, for it will soon pass beyond your control. But if I might advise, you will use it in making your peace with the world. Your doom is sealed as surely as though you were already cold in the embrace of death. That you may know I am not speaking at random—listen:

"Yesterday you had an interview with Sonorita Carmela Felix. You were interrupted by Don Carillo Felix. Naturally he was angered by your audacious presumption, and hard words were spoken before he struck you with a whip. You slunk away, after muttering a bitter threat. That threat was overheard, and will be sworn to when the proper time comes.

"Immediately afterward, you are joined by Tio Tomas, a servant of Don Felix. Seeking cover you plot against him and his. You swear revenge, and learning that they are to start upon a long journey in the morning, you decide to waylay the party with a force disguised as Indians, to kill Don Felix, abduct his daughter and force her into a marriage with you. All this was overheard by one whose word will be believed, especially when the damning testimony is given under oath."

Don Manuel paused to note the effect of his words, but there was not the faintest trace of emotion upon the hard-set face of his prisoner. He laughed shortly, then continued:

"With the day-dawn, Don Felix and his escort will set forth. Sometime during the day they will be ambushed, precisely as you decided yesterday. Don Felix will be killed, Sonorita Carmela abducted, by your men, led by yourself! Ha! ha! that shot strikes home!" the villain cried exultantly as Joaquin made a convulsive motion as though to leap at the throat of the mocking demon.

But the clank of the chains recalled him to a full sense of his helplessness, and with a smothered execration he resumed his former attitude. Unspeakable hatred glowed in his eyes. Heaven pity Manuel Camplido should fate ever cast him into the hands of Joaquin Murieta!

"Let me draw another picture, since you like this one so well," added Camplido, enjoying this foretaste of revenge, and longing for more. "Some of the escort will escape, and the story of the terrible tragedy will spread like wildfire. It will reach my ears, and I will at once set forth to rescue my beautiful betrothed, or to share her fate. Nerved by love, what power can resist my arm? I succeed—I rescue the lady, exterminate your band of mock-Indians, and take you prisoner. I deliver you up to justice. My witnesses are well trained, and tell a straightforward story. The threat and the plot are sworn to; you were recognized, despite your disguise, by at least two of the escort who escaped. They swear to this, I swear that I captured you red-handed. Your guilt is proven beyond the shadow of a doubt, and you are sentenced—of course to suffer death, but in just what shape I have not yet fully decided. If the trial takes place before a regular tribunal of law, you will be garroted. If tried by the lynch law of your loved Americans, then a hasty noose—either way a sure and shameful death!"

"And if Carmela will redeem her plighted troth, and I will teach her to strew curses over the dishonored grave of the wretch who murdered her father."

"There you have the programme, Don Joaquin Murieta. Sleep on it, and may the Virgin send you pleasant dreams. Adios!"

Laughing mockingly, the exultant villain left the dungeon, followed by his only less delighted servants.

CHAPTER XI.

BETRAYED BY A KISS.

Jose intended to speak nothing but the plain truth when he declared to Don Manuel Camplido that none save old Blas and Agatone had seen them enter with their prisoner, and that absolutely no one save themselves so much as suspected the identity of the captive. But for all that he lied.

Eager eyes had been upon the two ruffians when they drew rein to ruffle the features of the young Sonorian, eyes that were rendered keen and penetrating, not by hatred, but by love.

Attached to the Camplido household was a young woman of mixed blood, Josefa by name, the offspring of a forced alliance between an Apache chief and a Mexican woman who had fallen captive to his bow and spear. The story of Josefa's life was one of wild romance and thrilling adventure, but can find no place here. Allusion to it is made only to in part explain the share she played in the coming events.

Josefa was, to some extent, a privileged character in the Camplido household, coming and going as she chose, giving an account of her actions to no one, treating even the master himself with disdain should the course of his inclinations run counter to that of her own.

Despite the cross in her blood, Josefa was a beauty, of the purely material sort, who might have stood as a model for a Southern Venus. Her shape was lithe and graceful, yet voluptuously developed. Her hands and feet were small and shapely, her jetty hair a marvel of luxuriance, her even white teeth gleaming like twin rows of pearls, her great black eyes, at times soft and gentle as those of a timid fawn, then fiery and menacing as those of the enraged jaguar.

Josefa had frequently visited the Santa Anna hacienda, and while there had made the acquaintance of Joaquin Murieta. The young Sonorian had not been wholly unmoved by her sparkling beauty, and something of a flirtation grew up between them, for Joaquin was no misogynist, as his after record in California plainly evidences. But this was before he rescued Senorita Carmela Felix from the infuriated bull; after that, to do him justice, he may have uttered friendly words to Josefa, but never more speech of love.

The beautiful young savage must have suffered intensely, for she loved Joaquin as only she, and such as she, can adore, but she gave no outward sign of the tortures that racked her heart. Her love for him, instead of weakening, grew the more intense; her hatred was all reserved for Carmela.

She was at home when the encounter took place between Joaquin and Don Manuel, but learned the whole story by nightfall. Even better than himself, she realized the peril that threatened the young Sonorian, and calling all her cunning into requisition, she sought to foil his enemies. Unfortunately she knew nothing of the orders given Pedro Canales and Jose by Don Manuel before he returned home, and she only suspected the truth when she recognized the horse which bore the prisoner, whose face she had been unable to see.

Josefa followed the kidnappers into the building closely enough to see that they went to the dungeon. She dared not follow lest they surprise her and suspect her purpose, but her wits were keen, and worked swiftly.

"If it is he, they will make haste to report to the master. He is in his room—I must hear what they say!"

And when Jose was giving in his report, every word was breathlessly recorded by the half-breed girl. More than that, Josefa, wrought up to such a pitch of excitement that she forgot all personal fears, followed the ruffians when they visited the prisoner, and with her ear at the key-hole, overheard the jeering taunts uttered by Don Manuel.

As she listened, Josefa grew calmer, and when she learned that Joaquin was in no immediate danger of death, she stole silently away, knowing that should she excite suspicion, his only chance would be ruined.

Through the rest of the night Josefa brooded deeply over what she had heard. The diabolical plot against Don Felix gave her little uneasiness, rather the contrary, and though there was ample time for her to convey a warning to the Felix hacienda, the idea of doing so never once occurred to her. Let Don Camplido triumph thus far. By doing so a dangerous rival would be removed from her path. Only for Carmela, she felt that Joaquin could not long remain insensible to her love. Her whole mind was devoted to the discovery of some plan by which Joaquin might be set at liberty.

Before day dawned a body of horsemen left the rancho, led by Don Camplido in person, and Josefa had no trouble in guessing the motive of their mission. Pedro Canales was left in charge, and the half-breed girl knew not whether to rejoice or be sorry.

For months the burly groom had been fiercely in love with Josefa, and it was the partiality shown by her to Joaquin that caused him to hate the young Sonorian so bitterly. He had not spared his taunts and reproaches, especially since Joaquin became infatuated with Carmela, and more than one sharp passage had taken place between him and Josefa, for which she now had deep cause of regret.

She frequently crossed the groom's path that day, but instead of accepting the chances so adroitly, yet with such seeming unconsciousness, thrown in his way for a little flirtation, Pedro Canales persistently avoided her. She knew what this meant. He feared to betray his master's secret. But Josefa smiled as she saw him drinking freely to strengthen his resolution, for past experience told her that after passing a certain stage of intoxication, Pedro Canales was as well-worked clay in the hands of an experienced potter. Eagerly she watched for that period, but the burly groom was also well aware of his weak points, and when his eyes began to glaze and his footsteps to grow unsteady, he wagged his head gravely and beat a retreat to the private chamber of Don Manuel.

In desperation Josefa stole after him, only to

hear the key turned and the massive bolts shot into place. For a moment she hesitated, her black eyes glowing like those of a baffled tigress, then hastened at once to the secret loophole through which she had seen and heard on the past night.

It was lucky that she had lost no time, and only by biting her red lips until the blood flowed freely did the girl keep from uttering an exclamation that might have ruined all had it reached the ears of the drunken groom.

Pedro Canales was standing in the middle of the room, supporting himself against the table, his gaze fixed fishily upon several keys lying before him.

"Senor Don Pedro Canales, you're drunk—and a fool," he uttered huskily, seemingly unconscious that he was uttering his thoughts aloud. "There's the keys—Don Manuel said never loosen my grip upon them—but I'm getting drunk, and that little devil-of-an-angel—there's mischief in her eyes or I never saw it before. She bunts me, instead of I her, to-day. Why? Devil knows, not me. Maybe she suspects—maybe she wants to bamboozle me—maybe she wants to get these keys and set Joaquin Dog-of-a-devil free—maybe I'm a fool on top of a fool, but it won't do any harm to be on the safe side. I'll hide the keys, take a nap to steady my brain, then pretend to humor little Josefa, and who knows? A live dog is better than a dead lion—before he came, she used to smile on me!"

Had the stake for which she was playing been less great, Josefa could have heartily enjoyed the scene. Pedro spoke by fits and starts, interrupted by frequent hiccoughs and deviations from the perpendicular, which was only recovered by spasmodic efforts, each one causing the vertebrae of the drunkard to creak and his teeth to snap together like those of an alligator. But she had thoughts only for Joaquin and his danger, and eagerly watched Pedro Canales as he looked around for a secure hiding-place in which to stow away the keys.

A pair of soiled, well worn riding boots stood in one corner of the room, and as Pedro noticed them, he nodded so violently that he was only saved by the table from toppling over headlong. Recovering himself, he took the keys and managed to place them in one of the boots. Drunk though he was, Pedro Canales was no fool. No one would think of looking in such a place for what they sought.

Satisfied that he had performed his duty, he lay down on the floor and almost instantly fell asleep.

Josefa stole silently away, already devising some plan by which Pedro could be enticed from the room long enough for her to gain possession of the keys, without which all her efforts must be in vain. Yet she was in no haste to accomplish this. She knew that it would be impossible for Joaquin to escape, even when set free from his irons, from the dungeon and house until after dark. So long as Canales left the keys in the boot, they were safer than in her possession.

One point more Josefa learned. Jose was on guard before the dungeon door, and she hardly knew whether this fact was to be regretted or the contrary. Jose was that rarity of the Mexican race: a man who cared little for liquor, and who was never known to get drunk except on his "name-saint's" day.

On the other side he was even more susceptible to the charms of the gentler sex than was Pedro, without more than a moiety of that rascal's shrewdness. He, too, had yielded to the bewitching beauty of the half-breed girl, though as yet he had ventured only to worship her in silence and from afar.

Josefa had formed her plans, and was impatiently waiting the proper time for setting them in motion, when she was startled by the rapid trampling of hoofs and then excited voices beyond the large gate. Old Blas, the warder, rushed in calling for Pedro Canales, who soon made his appearance.

Josefa, though strongly interested by the few words she had managed to catch, at once took advantage of the confusion to enter Don Manuel Camplido's chamber and secure the precious keys. With these safely hidden in her bosom, the half-breed girl mingled with the excited servants as they listened in breathless horror to the words of the two blood-stained horsemen whom all recognized as servants to Don Felix.

Their party had been waylaid by Indians, Don Felix killed, and Senorita Carmela carried into captivity.

Josefa waited to hear no more, but, glad of a plausible excuse, she hastened at once to where Jose stood on guard. Terror and horror were in her face, her voice trembled as she poured out the tragic news—a truly admirable bit of acting, which reached the climax when her limbs failed her and she sunk limply into the arms of the guard.

"It brings it all back—the terrible story my mother used to tell," she faltered, moving her head slightly so that her warm breath fanned Jose's cheek, her red lips pouting just below his. "I thought I should die; but I feel safer now. You will protect me, dear Jose?"

Pedro Canales might have seen something strange in this unusual emotion, for which there

was such slight cause. But not so Jose. He saw only the rich beauty of that face—those tempting lips—and, with an audacity that caused his brain to whirl dizzily, he kissed her.

The world did not come to an end, nor did Josefa seem mortally offended. True, she struggled a little to free herself, but ceased her efforts when she felt Jose relaxing his arms. A faint sigh, as she nestled a little closer to him, was enough. Again his lips fastened upon hers, more ardently, almost fiercely, and then Josefa glided cool-like from his embrace, for she knew that her purpose was gained—that Jose would be like wax in her hands after this.

"We will be seen—some one will come to tell you the news," she said hastily, as the amorous rascal sought to again embrace her. "When you are off duty this evening, then I will see you again."

A sullen curse broke from the fellow's lips.

"I am fixed here as though chained hand and foot," he growled. "That cursed Canales is so stuck up because the master left him in charge, that he refuses to stand his turn, and I dare not call any one else to relieve me."

Jose paused abruptly with a suspicion that he was saying too much, but Josefa smiled like a siren, and looking upon her charms, the suspicion fled from his brain.

"I must go—there would be talk if any one were to see me here," she murmured, the picture of maidenly modesty.

"What matter? Let them talk. The answer is plain—unless you are playing the fool with me," and a fresh suspicion crept into his thick skull.

"Wait—there is no time now. As soon as all is settled for the night, I will come again, to keep you company for a few minutes. And then—then," she added, with a charming confusion and a glowing side-glance, that sent the hot blood tingling through Jose's veins, "you may finish what you began saying."

Light as a fawn she leaped to his side and daintily touched her lips to his, then gracefully eluding his clumsy grasp, she glided away.

Could Jose have seen the expression of utter disgust that rested upon her face as she gained her room, and there used soap and water, rubbing her cheeks and lips until the red blood seemed on the point of bursting through the skin, perhaps his castles in the air would not have been so full of bliss.

It was now nearly night, but Josefa had weary hours to wait before she dared make the desperate attempt to free the man whom she had loved so hopelessly. The news of the Felix tragedy was the cause of high excitement, and the usual hour for the household to retire arrived without any signs of their dispersing, for fresh tidings came to them just then.

Several of the escort who had escaped being massacred, had come together, and venturing back, had found Don Felix still living, but terribly injured and scalpless! And more—one of the retainers swore positively that the attacking party was composed of whites, led by none other than Joaquin Murieta! From the covert into which he had crawled, he saw them closely and heard them conversing; there could be no mistake.

Josefa dared wait no longer. She knew that Don Manuel Camplido might return at any moment, when all her plotting would be frustrated. And so, with the keys in her bosom, and a small flask of powerfully drugged brandy in her pocket, she hastened to where Jose was still on guard, his grim face looking more than usually forbidding in the ruddy glare of the rude lamp suspended from the rock ceiling.

At the first glance Josefa saw that Jose had been doing some sturdy thinking since she left him, and with not a little anxiety for the result, she addressed him:

"That terrible story has so excited them all, that there is yet no thought of settling down for the night. I hardly dared come—only I promised; and even now I am endangering my good name, very foolishly, I fear, for one who scorns me."

Jose drew himself up sturdily and shook his head.

"That sounds mighty nice, pretty one, and I would give a good deal to be able to believe it, but the change comes too sudden. First it was Pedro Canales that filled your eyes, then that cursed dandy Joaquin came in for your sweetest smiles. All the time, an honest devil like me, you would not look at—"

"And why?" quickly demanded Josefa, drawing closer. "Bah! you stupid men are so blind! You never spoke—and then there was that fat Lucina singing your praises all day long—swearing that you had promised to wed her ere long. What could a poor girl do?"

Jose started forward and grasped her by the arm, a light in his eyes, a look upon his face, such as had never been there before. His voice was husky and strained as he spoke:

"Girl, if you are playing with me now, you had better never been born! You have stirred my heart and awakened passions that I did not dream I could ever feel. I love you so madly that I could almost tear you to pieces, so that no other eyes might look upon you. Just what I feel, I can not put into words now, but I know

this much; if you are playing me false, I will kill you!"

High-couraged though she undoubtedly was, Josefa shrunk away from the fellow, awed by the terrible passion which she had awakened, but only for a moment. She remembered that but for her, Joaquin Murieta must die a shameful death for a crime which he had never committed, and that to effect his escape, this man must be removed.

"Look in my eyes and read the truth there, Jose, if you can not believe my lips," she breathed softly, coming so close that her clothes touched his. "There is but one man in the wide world for me—the rest are less than nothing!"

There was no acting in this last assertion, but Josefa did not mean Jose, though that foolish fellow believed she did.

"And his name is—what?" he asked, eagerly, his eyes aglow.

"Some day—not now," laughed Josefa, coquettishly, then drawing forth the flask, and holding it before his eyes. "See! though I dare not stay here longer, you shall not stand guard alone. It is cold and damp here. This will warm you."

But Jose shook his head, once more suspicious.

"No, I am on guard, and must not drink. The master was positive, and you know what he is when the devil that is in him once breaks loose. He may return at any moment. Put up the bottle—give me a kiss instead."

Better for the unlucky rascal if he had yielded to the temptation and drank. There was only one course left for Josefa to follow—a terrible one, but she remembered Joaquin, and took it.

She yielded to his eager embrace—one little hand nestled playfully against his throat—then closed upon it like a vise as her right hand drove a long blade home to his very heart!

CHAPTER XII.

JOAQUIN STRIKES HOME.

SWIFT and sure was the blow, though dealt by a woman's hand. Checked only when its guard struck against the quivering flesh, the slender blade punctured the wildly-throbbing heart, cutting short the thread of life, scarce granting the doomed wretch time sufficient to realize that he had been betrayed by a kiss.

No cry, no shout, only a gurgling, hollow groan that was nearly stifled by the fierce grasp which the human tigress had fastened upon his throat. A convulsive shuddering that could not be called a struggle, then the sinewy limbs of the betrayed guard gave way, and only for Josefa, he would have fallen heavily to the floor. Instead, she pushed him back to the wall and propped him against it in a sitting position. Not even then did her deadly grasp on his throat relax—not until she saw that death had claimed its victim beyond all doubt.

Then she rose erect and staggered back, one hand clasped over her eyes, the other pressed convulsively to her heart. Now that the fearful deed was done, she realized its enormity, and her heart turned deathly sick within her bosom. After all, she was but a poor, weak girl, driven to the very verge of madness by the peril which threatened the man she loved.

An indistinct sound from beyond the heavy iron-bound door came to her ears. She recognized the clanking of chains, and quickly rallied. Joaquin was yet a prisoner, yet in danger, and until he was in safety, she could spare no thought for herself.

Fitting the heavy key, she turned the rusty bolt, then swung the door open. In the dim light, the white face of the young Sonorian looked like that of some specter, his eyes glowing with defiance as the opening door attracted his notice. But as he recognized Josefa, instead of the mocking enemy he expected to see, a low cry of wonder parted his lips.

The half-breed girl sprang to his side, her little hand pressing upon his mouth as she hurriedly uttered:

"Not a sound—not a word as you value your life and liberty! For my sake, if not for your own, place a guard upon your lips until the open air is reached."

While she spoke, her hands were not idle. One by one the bolts were turned and the heavy shackles fell from his limbs. In silence he suffered her to perform this, gazing at her in a bewildered manner, unable as yet to realize the truth. In all his dreams of escape, not one had assumed this shape. Knowing the fiery spirit of the girl, he would sooner look for a knife-thrust.

Josefa smiled sadly as she read his thoughts in his face, but she said nothing then, only arose when the last iron dropped off his limbs, and beckoned him to follow.

Once across the threshold, Joaquin speedily became his usual self, and a ferocious gleam came into his eyes as he recognized the face of Jose—but only for an instant. He saw death in the man's face, and noticed the red streak down his bosom where the blood had flowed from his punctured heart. He turned quickly toward Josefa, who had just closed and locked the door of the dungeon. Her head drooped be-

fore his inquiring gaze, but there was no perceptible tremor in the voice that uttered:

"There was no other way. He refused the drugged brandy I offered him. He stood between you and freedom. To save your life, I took his."

"I am sorry that his blood is on your hands—not but that the villain deserved his fate. I had sworn to kill him if ever I won my freedom. I am only sorry for your sake, Josefa."

"Your life was in peril—I thought only of that, and if a dozen lives had stood between, I would have taken them without a single pang of remorse!"

The girl's voice was not so steady, and there was a growing light in her dark eyes that gave Joaquin some uneasiness. They were not yet out of danger, and should she give way to her emotions now, the result might be fatal to them both.

"You must tell me all when we once get outside of this cursed place, Josefa," he said, more coldly than he should have spoken under the circumstances, but the desired effect was accomplished.

"Take his weapons, then," she said, all traces of emotion having vanished. "I have your own arms concealed outside. I did not dare bring them with me, lest some one should notice them and suspect my purpose. I believe the passage is clear, but we may meet some one, and you must not be recaptured after this," with a glance at the dead man.

"Not all the servants on the place could bar my passage while I hold these tools!" exclaimed Joaquin, taking a knife and brace of revolvers from the corpse. "But you, Josefa—you must run no further risk on my account. Go on ahead, and when you are safe, I will follow."

"No, if you have to fight, I will fight too. Unless you can escape, my life is worse than nothing."

Quietly the words were spoken, but Joaquin knew that it would be a waste of precious time for him to attempt to change her determination. Taking the dead man's sombrero and pulling it far down over his eyes, he satisfied himself that his weapons were in working order, then said:

"Come, then. Keep behind me—"

For answer Josefa sprang lightly past him and led the way up the stone steps. Not a little annoyed at her running this unnecessary risk, Joaquin swiftly followed her.

But fortune seemed to smile upon them. The great hall was deserted by even old Blas, who satisfied his conscience by bolting the door, then joined the other servants, who punished many a flask of good liquor while discussing the startling tidings recently brought them.

Josefa opened the door, and they emerged from the building. Both knew that there was one more barrier to be passed before freedom could fairly be claimed, and anxiously they looked toward the great gates beyond.

But the master was absent, and the old proverb held good in this case. Pedro Canales was too drunk to think of enforcing discipline, and those worthies whose duty it was to attend to the great gates, the only mode of ingress or egress, were quite as fond of cracking a bottle as their temporary master, and had deserted their post of duty.

With a low, glad cry, Josefa sprang ahead to the gates and flung them open, but even on the threshold of liberty Joaquin paused.

The servants' quarters, though inclosed by the same wall as the hacienda proper, were under a separate roof, in one corner of the extensive courtyard. Bright lights could be seen glancing through the open windows and doorway. From within came the confused sound of voices and clinking glasses. Then, just as Josefa flung wide the last barrier, a hoarse, thick voice roared out above the din:

"Gentlemen and ladies, I give you a toast: death and eternal damnation to Joaquin Murieta, the traitorous assassin and kidnapper!"

The voice was that of Pedro Canales, and as Joaquin remembered the brutal treatment he had received when a helpless prisoner in his hands, his blood began to boil, and drawing his weapons he strode toward the building.

Josefa read his action aright, and swift as a deer, she intercepted him, her voice intense but guarded.

"Are you mad? Would you ruin all that I have dared for your sake? You might kill him, but there are others—one, two score. They are half-crazed by liquor now. They believe you murdered Don Carrillo Felix and stole away his daughter. One glimpse of you would render them frantic—would change them into demons, and you would be torn limb from limb in their fury!"

"Stand aside, Josefa!" he muttered hoarsely. "I swore to kill that dog in human shape, and not even you can hinder me!"

Suddenly releasing him, but still barring the way, Josefa drew from her bosom a dagger that still bore red stains.

"Look! with this blade I killed Jose to set you free. The hand that could kill a man, can kill a woman. Back! abandon your mad purpose, or I will drive this dagger home to my heart, even as it pierced his!"

Even in his madness, Joaquin saw that the half-breed girl was making no idle threat, that unless he yielded, she would send the blood-stained steel to her heart, and reluctantly he abandoned his purpose.

"Come, then, quick!" he muttered hoarsely. "If I hear him again, not even you can keep me from leaping at his throat!" and turning he rushed back through the gates.

"At last you are free!" but the words were a sound of sadness rather than joy. "Go—secure a horse and flee far from here. Every moment you delay but increases your peril. By to-morrow the avengers of blood will be upon your trail. Ride hard and fast, for there is no safety for you this side of your far-away home!"

A low, hard laugh broke from the young Sonorian.

"You do not know me yet, little girl. From what you let drop a moment since, I know that Don Manuel Campido has carried out the first part of his diabolical plans. Don Felix has given me no particular cause for loving him, but I do love his daughter, and for her sake I swear to avenge her father. She, too, must be in deadly peril, and while that is the case, I have no time or inclination to think of myself."

Josefa shrunk away with a low, gasping sob. Joaquin understood only too well, and he drew her to his side with gentle force, his voice sounding strangely soft and sweet.

"Dear child—my sister!" and he gently pressed his lips to her cold brow. "To attempt to hide the truth would be cruel. If I had never met Carmela Felix, both your fate and mine might have been very different. While she lives, my heart can never recognize another love—"

"Stop!" cried the Indian girl, tearing herself from his arms. "Would you kill me? You know how I love you—how I have fairly idolized you from the day we first met—yet you can coldly tell me of your passion for another! What has she done to deserve your love? I—I have shed the heart's blood of a man who, brutal though he may have been, loved me and wanted to make me his wife. Could she have done that?"

"Love goes where it wills, not where it is sent, Josefa."

This was all Joaquin dared to say just then, but it proved sufficient. With a sobbing cry, Josefa flung her arms around his neck and pressed her cold lips to his; then released him and fled back to the house.

Joaquin hesitated for a moment, but then turned away to the corral where he knew Don Manuel Campido kept his private saddle-horses. A bit of rapid but thorough scouting convinced him that there was no guard on duty, and entering the inclosure, he cautiously approached the horses.

Like all true born horsemen, Joaquin was gifted with that peculiar magnetism that is rarely resisted by even the most suspicious horse. A gentle approach, a few soft words, and then his fingers closed upon the forelock of the noble animal which he had taken from Don Manuel Campido in exchange for his own black stallion.

As he led the horse to the entrance, a grating curse hissed through his teeth, and he jerked forth a pistol, for a human figure arose before him as though to dispute his passage. But only for an instant did his alarm last, for he recognized Josefa, the half-breed girl.

"Child," he exclaimed, reproachfully, "you should be more cautious. Only that the moon-beams enabled me to recognize you in time, I would have taken you for an enemy and sent a bullet through your heart!"

"The lead could not have given me a more deadly pang than your words of a moment since," sadly replied the girl, then adding in a more natural tone: "But think not that I came back to reproach you. I forgot to show you where I concealed your weapons and horse-furniture. Come, your escape may be discovered at any moment."

In silence Joaquin followed, leading his horse. Josefa uncovered the articles, and seemed waiting for him to apply them and take his departure. Murieta read her intention, but, as her presence would interfere with a daring resolve he had suddenly formed, he spoke:

"Some day I hope to thank you for all you have done for me, dear child. There is no time now, and my tongue would fail me were I to make the attempt. As you say, my escape may be discovered at any moment. For myself, now that I am armed and horsed, I have no fears, but for you—many. I beg of you to return to the house and go to bed. That will avert suspicion that might otherwise fall upon you. Go, dear sister, for my sake."

As he concluded, Joaquin bowed his head and dropped a gentle kiss upon her forehead. Josefa seemed about to speak, but then, doubtless fearing to trust herself, she turned and glided away.

Joaquin watched her until he saw her vanish inside the gates, and drew a long breath of relief as he saw that she made no attempt to close the barrier.

"It would only be one more obstacle; but, as time is precious, I am glad that she left the way."

clear. Poor girl! I wish that my conscience was clearer concerning her!"

Fortunately for his own peace of mind, perhaps, Joaquin had not leisure just then to devote much thought to the hapless Indian girl. In truth, he had treated her badly, though there was much that could be urged in extenuation. But his sin was destined to bear its own fruit.

Rapidly he saddled and bridled his horse, then carefully inspected his weapons, greatly pleased to find that they had suffered no hurt by the rough usage he had been subjected to. Through many a peril they had been his companions, and never yet had failed him when called upon. With them in his possession he felt doubly armed, yet he did not discard the weapons taken from dead Jose. He was about entering on a struggle to the death against fearful odds, and the time might come when he would need every possible resource.

Removing his torn and stained jacket, Joaquin cut it into four equal parts, and placing a layer of sand on each one, he securely muffled his horse's hoofs. Then mounting, he rode slowly back to the great gates and entered the paved court-yard. Here the object of his precautions was made apparent, for not the faintest sound accompanied the footfalls of his steed.

The revels in the servants' quarters were still in progress, and Joaquin rode boldly up to the door, gazing quietly upon the riotous scene, but with a dancing, glittering devil in each eye that boded mischief to somebody.

Pedro Canales occupied the position of honor at the head of the table, furthest from the door. He was on his feet, kept there by leaning heavily against the board, and saying:

"Once more—death and eternal damnation to Joaquin!"

"Joaquin is here!" and bending low in the saddle, Joaquin leaped his horse into the room, his lasso whirling round his head.

A yell of terror escaped Pedro Canales, but it was his last.

The deadly noose settled around his throat, and wheeling, Joaquin rode away, sweeping the table clear with the body of his enemy!

CHAPTER XIII.

CAMPLIDO AND HIS CAPTIVE.

"My dear, your health will suffer and your beauty fade away like a summer cloud, unless you grow more reasonable and partake of some nourishment."

The speaker was Don Manuel Camplido, and he addressed Senorita Canales Felix. There was a mocking politeness, an exaggerated solicitude in his tones that was insulting, and so the maiden considered as she turned away her head with a gesture of aversion.

The sun had just set, but the red, angry-looking sky cast a flood of lurid light over the little encampment, perched there amid the thick-lying rocks, a lone and dreary spot, but peculiarly appropriate for these desert vultures.

Don Manuel Camplido, bearing Carmela before him, had ridden hard and long after leaving the spot where Don Felix had fallen a victim to his atrocious treachery. He reached the rendezvous first, but ere long his men began to drop in, having divided the more surely to break and obliterate their trail. All were jovial for they felt that a difficult and dangerous job had been carried through most successfully. Fires were kindled and supper prepared.

After that one frantic outburst, Carmela had been like one stupefied by the immeasurable calamity which had fallen. Don Camplido had accounted himself lucky that such was the case, since it saved him trouble while on the road, but now he began to feel uneasy and tried to move the grief-frozen statue, caring little whether it was to tears or reproaches.

"My dear, dainty lady-bird, you are acting very foolishly," he added, seating himself beside her. "The past is past, and cannot be recalled. Of course I deeply regret all that has happened, but for this you are to blame, not me. I met and loved you. I declared my passion, and you accepted my suit, only to throw me over for a low-born dog of a cattle-driver—"

A sharp cry of anger broke from Carmela's lips as she turned sharply upon the taunting villain, her clinched hand striking at his face, to avenge the insult put upon the man whom she loved. But Don Manuel caught her hand in his, laughing maliciously as he held her prisoner, for he had at length accomplished his purpose.

"So, you can feel the spur! Show your native good sense now, by eating some of this meat. You will need all your powers of body and mind, remember, before this pleasant captivity can come to an end."

Don Manuel succeeded even better than he expected. A change as sudden as it was complete came over the maiden. The traces of tears left her eyes, seemingly dried up by the steady, burning fire that glowed therein. A cold, icy smile curled her lips, and taking the prepared meal with fingers that were far steadier than his own, she ate heartily and with seeming relish. She even laughed at his undisguised surprise—a laugh cold and metallic, that caused a peculiar chill to creep over him for the moment.

"You see, I take your advice. I have acted the poor, silly, weak woman, but that is past now."

Don Manuel Camplido began to wish he had left well enough alone. A woman like this would give him trouble before the end, but he quickly disguised his fears, and in hopes of undoing the work he had been so anxious to accomplish but a brief space before, he gave full vent to his natural malignity.

"I am overjoyed to see that you are recovering your usual good sense, my dear. Not that I blame you much for giving way, for the knowledge that naught of this sad affair would have come about only for your fickleness and love of admiration, must be bitter indeed. You are to be praised for bearing up so well, and no doubt your father would feel very proud of his child as an honor to his race, but alas! does such knowledge reach beyond the grave?"

Carmela turned ghastly pale, even to her lips, at this hypocritical speech from the lips of the demon who had so treacherously slain her parent; but her nerves were steeled, and she gave no other sign of the torture she felt.

Camplido had been drinking freely, both while lying in ambush, and since the tragedy, while conveying the captive to the rendezvous. Until now he had given little sign of feeling its influence, save in his blearing eyes, his flushed countenance and his slightly thickened speech. But as he yielded to his malevolent passions, he lost all control of himself, and perhaps spoke more freely than he would have deemed prudent, were he fairly himself.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, in a coarse, brutal tone. "I am tired of wearing a mask and keeping my tongue under guard. You have seen enough this day to know that I am no saint; for once you shall see me as I really am."

"I meant you and yours fairly enough when I first began to plead my suit, and could I have won your love then, I would have been a better man than now. But you all looked down on me—you most scornfully of all, lady-bird—and then I swore a solemn oath to succeed, by foul means if fair ones failed. It was not difficult to read Don Felix, and when I saw that his dearest hopes lay in his heir, Don Luis, I laid my plans accordingly."

"It would take too much time to go over in detail all that I accomplished; enough that I secured the hold I desired—that by my agency Don Luis was led over head and ears into all manner of extravagances, ending in a crime that will have to be expiated by death, if ever I am forced to make the whole truth known."

The villain paused here, and gazed keenly at Carmela, but she made no sign, uttered no word, steadily eating her food.

With a short, ugly laugh Don Manuel continued:

"I admire the depth of your sisterly love—but let that pass. You know how we were betrothed—how all went smoothly until that low-born vagabond blundered into saving your life, for which, like a true-born heroine, you gave him your love."

"I was not long in learning of this, but for your credit, rather than my own, I made no outward sign, but tried to put the audacious rascal out of the way of giving us more trouble. The devil, his sire, stood his friend then as he has since, and I only lost the services of two good tools. But when one blow fails, I know how to strike another, and at length I have my revenge on Joaquin Murieta."

"Yesterday, when he defeated and disgraced you—when he caused you to cringe and cower humbly at his feet like a sorely flogged hound—he alone, you backed by at least a score of armed men, all his enemies?" sharply cried Carmela, promptly taking advantage of the opening.

Thorough-paced villain though he was, Don Manuel flushed hotly with shame at the memory, but he quickly recovered and barbed his words with sharper stings than ever.

"That was his turn; mine came a few hours later. But let me relate things in their proper order."

"Joaquin Murieta, flushed with his brief triumph, hastened to sun himself in your approving smiles. He found you—if necessary, I could repeat every word that passed between you, describe faithfully each one your little endearments, for besides the spies whom Don Felix had at work, I had men on the trail even more cunning than his."

"They saw Don Felix break in upon you—saw him lash your low-born hero like a dog—saw him bow to the degradation, but utter a bitter threat that he would have revenge."

"A lie—foul as the tongue that gives it utterance!" cried Carmela, indignation getting the better of her resolution.

"Possibly. A gentleman never contradicts a lady," retorted Don Manuel, bowing low with mock politeness. "Unfortunately for your dandy cow-herd, my spies make no pretensions to gentility, and when questioned, they will swear that Joaquin uttered that threat to be bitterly avenged. Nor is that all."

"After leaving you, Joaquin Murieta was joined by old Tio Tomas, and together they concocted a precious plot. Tio Tomas told him

where you were bound, and what trail your party would follow. He said that the only way to win you, was to ambush the escort and carry you off by force—that you would not be mortally offended, and readily grant your forgiveness as soon as you caught the flutter of a priest's gown in the distance. Complimentary, but true!"

Carmela made no comment, for she believed Don Manuel was deliberately lying.

Senor Don Vagabundo leaped with joy at the idea, and vowed that he would act upon it. He proposed, but I disposed. Already I had put two good men on his track, and when my spies reported the conversation they overheard, I at once resolved to take advantage of the fact, to reap the reward, while he should be made to bear all the odium.

"I had scarcely plotted the details, when my two good men brought in Joaquin a prisoner—Ha! that touches you!" and he laughed maliciously as Carmela gave a convulsive start, turning pale as a corpse as she pictured her lover a helpless captive in the power of this merciless scoundrel.

"If startled, it was by your audacious lying," she boldly retorted, even while the heart in her bosom was heavy as lead. "No two men in your employ could take him alive—nor any two score, unless they called foul treachery to their aid!"

"All the same, he is now chained hand and foot in the death-dungeon underneath my hacienda, still living, but only by my sufferance. Shall I tell you why I have spared his life? Do you wish to know the fate in store for him?"

"Remember what my spies are able and ready to swear. In addition, two of the escort who escaped, will swear that they recognized Joaquin Murieta as the leader of the band disguised as Apaches. They will tell the story—search will be made—the discarded disguises will be found; these will prove that the assassins of Don Felix were white men. In a few minutes I will return home, the terrible news having overtaken me on my way to the city. I will take the field at the head of my men—and in good time I will capture Joaquin Murieta, with undoubted proof of his guilt—the dying confession of one of his men."

"I will fight you to the bitter end!" cried Carmela, her eyes flashing hotly. "I will expose your foul plot!"

"Gently, my beauty," laughed Don Manuel. "To do this, you must first achieve your liberty, and that you can gain only after you have become my wife. Then it will be too late to save your lover. I will never relax my vigilance until I see him die the death of a dog, either by the garrote, or the noose of the hangman."

"Heaven will not let you triumph so far—or if it does, then I will avenge him!" cried the maiden, resolutely.

"That is a risk I am prepared to run. I have little fear but what I can manage you, when once my wife—"

"That time will never come—I will die first!"

"Death does not always visit those who call on him the loudest, lady-bird, and bear this in mind: there's more than one way to tame and break the will of a woman. You are now wholly at my mercy. If I chose—and I warn you not to try me too severely—I could make you beg on your knees as the greatest boon, what you now scorn. I will not descend to such harsh measures, until all else fails. But of this be sure. You are fated to become my wife, and struggle how you may, I will conquer you."

"You are a good Catholic. Before taking you where your tongue, if unbridled, might work me harm, you shall take the most solemn oaths never by word or deed to reveal the part I have, or am still, to play in this little drama."

"You see, I am guarded at every point. Nothing has been forgotten, and I am sure to win the game. Think over what I have told you, while I am gone, and try to make up your mind to yield to the inevitable."

Without waiting for a reply, Don Manuel arose and passed over to where his men were busy eating. He drew Gaspard aside, and gave him particular instructions concerning his care and treatment of Carmela, then mounted his horse and rode rapidly away.

Relieved of his odious presence, Carmela showed by her haggard and despondent countenance how deeply his infamous revelations had affected her. Despite her bold denial, she began to feel that her lover had indeed fallen into the power of his bitterest enemy. In no other manner could the bold assurance of Camplido be explained.

Her thoughts had carried her this far, when Carmela became conscious that a human being was trying to attract her attention by protruding a hand from a clump of dense bushes hard by, and moving it rapidly. Her heart leaped into her throat with a glad hope, and she glanced toward the outlaws. They suspected nothing, and she answered the signal. Then a face took the place of the hand—a face she at once recognized.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FRIEND ON THE TRAIL.

TIO TOMAS gave his advice in perfect good faith, and really felt that he was working for the best interests of both Carmela and her lover. In this belief, he regarded the smoke columns with positive pleasure, never doubting that Joaquin Murieta was connected therewith, and accepting it as a token that his counsel would be followed by the bold lover. Yet the veteran was not the least one surprised when the ambush was finally sprung, though he noted the peculiar advantages of the spot, and drew nearer to Don Felix and Carmela, feeling quite confident that now if ever would the trap be sprung.

The volley came, and to his horror and surprise, Tio Tomas found that the farce bade fair to become a tragedy as far as he was concerned. One of the bullets grazed his cheek, raising a purplish welt, as if from a heavy blow with a rawhide, while another passed through his clothes and broke the skin over his heart.

This double shock was severe, and he reeled in his saddle, then dropped to the ground like one slain or disabled. But, after the first moment of confused dismay, the cunning old campaigner recovered his presence of mind, and his fall was purely voluntary.

The impetuous charge of the mock Indians came just as he fell, and for a brief space it seemed as though Tio Tomas must be crushed beneath the trampling hoofs, but he displayed in no mean degree, the skill and adroitness for which he had been noted in days gone by, gliding like a snake through the *melee* and crowding his body beneath a rock where his person was safe from the dangers of hoof and weapon.

From this place of refuge, he looked out upon the struggle, and his blood chilled as he saw the weapons gleam and flash and the red life-current begin to flow.

"Holy Mother! that is no sham!" he mentally exclaimed as Don Felix struck down his first assailant. "I was a blind fool—those are real savages. Ha!" he cried aloud, forgetting himself as he witnessed the desperate attempt at revenge of the mutilated ruffians. "Guard thyself, Don Felix—blessed be all the saints! The little one has courage fit for the wife of the Cid himself!"

This as he saw Carmela shoot down the man who threatened the life of her father, and feeling a return of the fires of youth, Tio Tomas crawled out from beneath the rock, intending to play a more manful part in the game. But he was too late. Don Felix and Carmela wheeled and broke through the ranks of the enemy, who quickly recovered from their momentary confusion and thundered after in swift pursuit.

Tio Tomas hesitated for a moment as he watched that mad race. The escort had vanished in some miraculous manner, and even the two scouts were no longer where they had fallen when the ambush was first sprung. It all looked very much like treachery of some sort, and in his indignation forgetting the part he himself had intended to play, Tio Tomas resolved to pursue the pursuers and lend his master all the aid that lay in his power.

The veteran was a true born Mexican, and like all of his race, an inveterate opponent to pedestrianism. There were several horses running loose, in addition to his own, and he attempted to secure one of them. But the creatures were highly excited by the recent noise and confusion, added to the smell of powder smoke and fresh blood. One after another foiled his attempts, and the veteran narrowly escaped having his brains kicked out by his own horse, which then wheeled and set off in pursuit of the chase of its own accord.

Panting and breathless from his unusually severe exertions, Tio Tomas dropped down on a rock, and stared after his runaway horse with anything but an amiable cast of countenance. And the first use he made of his second wind was to pour out curses on the treacherous creature, as only a thoroughly enraged Mexican can.

Even should he secure a horse, Tio Tomas saw that he could not overtake the chase in time to be of service. At their present reckless, breakneck pace, the matter must soon be decided in one way or another, and as his old limbs began to stiffen again, Tio Tomas was not sure that his being left in the lurch by his horse was the worst thing that could have befallen him.

"A man may be prudent without being a coward," he muttered, gingerly fingering the purple wale on his cheek. "Old as I am, I could fight for the little one as long as two limbs held together, but it would be the act of a fool to get butchered without the faintest hope of doing her or any one else an iota of good. I will follow after, to learn how the matter ends, ready to strike a blow for the little one and the master, if there comes a chance, but I will go as the serpent, not as the lion."

None knew better than old Tio how full of peril such a trail as this might prove, and as the red sun gleamed on the weapons in the belt of the man shot down by Carmela, he resolved to increase his armament.

Scarcely had his fingers touched the pistol belt, when a red, blood-stained hand grasped his wrist with a cold and clammy touch. Tio Tomas, with an exclamation of mingled fear and anger, leaped back, the effort raising the man whom he had supposed a corpse to a sitting posture.

"Water! for the love of God—water!" came in a husky rattle from the dying wretch's throat, and as he swayed unsteadily to and fro, he presented a truly horrible picture.

Tio Tomas quickly recovered his usual nerve, and fancying he saw a clew to the mystery which so perplexed him, he hastened to where a dead horse lay, and removing the water gourd luckily uninjured and nearly full, he returned to the dying man and gave him a drink—but barely enough to moisten his parched throat and lips. The wounded wretch gasped and moaned as the gourd was wrested away, but Tio Tomas held the priceless liquid above his reach, crying sternly:

"Answer my questions, and you shall have all you can drink; refuse, and you may die like the dog you have lived, for you are no Indian—you are a white man. Tell me—who planned this ambush?"

"Joaquin Murieta—give me drink—I choke—I die!"

With a strength lent by the horrible torture he was suffering, the mock Indian leaped to his feet and tore the water bottle from the veteran's grasp. But it was the last flickering of the vital spark. Ere the bottle could touch his lips, he died, and falling heavily, the liquid he so coveted flowed from the flask over his face.

Tio Tomas was stupefied by this totally unexpected answer. True, he had believed Joaquin meant to ambush the party, but not in such a deadly manner. This man had tried to kill Don Felix, and he could still hear the dropping fire of the pursuing party.

But there was a still greater surprise in store for him. He saw that the escaping water was gradually soaking away the paint that masked the dead man's features, and with one end of his scarf, he removed paint sufficient to allow him to recognize the wretch—one of Don Manuel Camplido's retainers, and one who had been particularly hostile to the young Sonorian.

"A liar you lived, and with a foul lie hot on your lips you died, Sanchez Varrico!" muttered the veteran, arising with the coveted weapons in his hands. "Joaquin Murieta never enlisted such as you in his service—yet why did he say so, and him dying at the very moment?"

All this had consumed some little time, and Tio Tomas had not gone far before he came to a sudden pause.

The ground where he stood was considerably elevated above the level of the country toward the plain, and he saw the mishap which befell Don Felix, though the distance was too great for him to wholly comprehend what happened.

"Holy Virgin! the master and little one are both down—the enemy are thrown into confusion—they wheel and ride this way—they are pursued, and by one man alone!"

It did not seem possible, but despite his age, Tio Tomas had unusually keen eyes, and he could distinguish the tiny blue puffs of smoke as they shot out in advance of the solitary pursuer. Yet look as he might, he could see nothing of other men in chase, and was forced to the conclusion that nearly a score of men were fleeing in hot haste from a single adversary.

"It is only of a piece with all the rest!" he muttered, in a tone of disgust. "If the devil have not a finger in this pie, then it is because he no longer takes pleasure in mischief doing."

Tio Tomas, though rather fond of moralizing, even when he had no other listener than himself, saw that the present was no time for such indulgence. The mock red-skins were fleeing along the back trail quite as rapidly as they had gone over it in pursuit, and should they discover him he might fare but illy at their hands.

"Twice they grazed my life. The third stroke may take it. I had better hunt my hole while I can!"

There was great danger of discovery should he turn either to the right or the left, so Tio Tomas beat a hasty retreat, intending to conceal himself among the dense cover from whence the ambush had been sprung, but all at once he paused abruptly as his eyes rested upon the partially charred face of the dead Varrico. Should the enemy also note this—and they could scarcely avoid doing so—would they believe it the work of the dead man himself?

There was no time to waste, for the scene of the ambush could be scrutinized from a considerable distance along the trail, but, fortunately for himself, Tio Tomas could both reason and act quickly. Scraping up a handful of the blood-moistened earth, he daubed it liberally over the dead man's countenance, turned him over upon his face, then glided like a human serpent into the chaparral.

Scarcely had he done this than the leading horseman crossed the highest point of the trail, then almost immediately slackened his pace. His example was followed by his comrades, and the concealed watcher's heart throbbed almost painfully as he feared they were about to form

an ambush for the man who had so gallantly beaten them off from their helpless prey.

"By all the saints! yonder he comes, riding straight into the trap!"

But the sentence was never ended, for Tio Tomas recognized Don Manuel Camplido, and more—he saw the supposed mortal enemies meet in friendly conversation!

Don Manuel seemed to be the principal speaker, and after a few moments he turned and rode back the way he had come, while the paint-bedaubed crew came on to the chaparral, where they dismounted and began removing their Indian trappings. Tio Tomas saw that the paints had been put on without oil, from the ready manner in which they were removed, and he nestled down closer in his covert as he recognized one after another of the party. He knew that, were he found spying upon them, he would receive short shrift indeed.

From where he lay the veteran could catch brief snatches of their talk, enough to tell him just how the ground lay, and to solve the enigma that had so thoroughly puzzled him. His talk with Joaquin had been reported to Don Manuel, and that worthy had resolved to profit by the advice tendered the young Sonorian.

He learned, too, that Camplido had killed Don Felix and taken Carmela prisoner. Scarcely were the men arrayed in their usual dress than one of them exclaimed:

"Yonder rises the master's signal—to horse, comrades!"

As they rode briskly away, Tio Tomas crept from his covert and stole after them. His face was stern-set, and there was an unusual glitter in his old eyes. No one could tell better than he the great risk he would be running, but the veteran was no coward when he saw something worth fighting for, and he mentally registered an oath to foil the villainous Camplido, or yield up his life as the penalty of failure.

From his former position among the rocks, he watched the movements of Don Manuel and his fellows. When he saw the former, bearing the form of Carmela on the saddle before him, head for his position, he once more retreated to cover. From thence he noted the course followed by the head rascal, but dared not attempt to follow him just then. The outlaws were engaged in packing their dead fellows on horseback, meaning to carry them away to some spot where they might be hidden with little fear of their being unearthed as evidence against the living.

As they left the scene of bloodshed and death, Tio Tomas followed after. It was a difficult and most dangerous task he had voluntarily assumed, but he never flinched.

The broken nature of the ground was one point in his favor, for while it afforded good cover for a spy, it also compelled the horsemen to use caution in advancing. On a level, smooth tract of country, poor Tio Tomas would soon have been left hopelessly behind. As it was, success crowned his efforts, but the old fellow was in a sad case when the party at length went into camp. Yet, stiff and sore, his breath coming in gasps, feeling to his parched throat like puffs of air from a heated oven, the veteran did not give over his efforts until he succeeded in reaching a dense clump of bushes only a few feet from where poor Carmela sat.

From this ambush, Tio Tomas overheard every word spoken by Don Manuel Camplido, and that rascal would scarcely have felt as much at ease had he even suspected the truth—that he was kept covered by a revolver in the hands of one who had few superiors with that weapon. And had his drunken insults went beyond words, Camplido would have died in his tracks, though Tio Tomas knew that his own death must surely follow.

His hand it was that Carmela caught sight of soon after Don Manuel Camplido left her, his face that she recognized a moment later, his voice that came softly to her ears:

"Fear not, little one! old Tio Tomas is ready to die for you!"

CHAPTER XV.

A PERILOUS UNDERTAKING.

CARMELA bowed her head and covered her face with her hands, both to hide her powerful emotion from Gaspard, whose attention seemed attracted, though it was hardly possible that he could either have heard or seen Tio Tomas, and to collect her suddenly scattered thoughts.

She remembered having seen the old man fall when the pretended Indians fired their first volley from ambush, and though expecting nothing less than death herself, his supposed death had given her a sharp pang even then. Now—as by a miracle he had escaped, had dogged the kidnappers to this lone spot, where he declared his readiness to die in her defense. But those scant words, however encouraging, proved him to be alone, and what could one man, old and nearly worn out, accomplish against nearly a score of stout, reckless ruffians?

A heavy footfall checked her musings at this point, and quickly raising her head, Carmela beheld Gaspard before her.

A rough-spoken, brutal fellow, despite his magnificent form and really handsome face,

Carmela met his keen gaze haughtily, but Gaspard lacked no boldness where women alone were concerned.

"A few plain words at the outset, *senorita*, may save a world of trouble and no end of hard feelings. You know that Don Manuel Camplido left me in charge?"

Carmela bowed in silence, fearing to trust her tongue to speak. She sought to guess the fellow's real object, but only succeeded in deepening her own perplexity.

"Good, so far. You must know, too, what a precious prize Don Manuel considers you, from the trouble he has taken to secure possession. To my mind he is a fool for his pains, for no woman that ever lived could equal the risks he is running—but that is his affair."

"Did you intrude on my thoughts merely to say this?" a little sharply demanded Carmela, eager for, yet dreading the end.

"All in good time. A wise rider never spurs a willing horse," coolly retorted the fellow, dropping to a sitting posture before the maiden. "The master left you in my care, and swore that my life should pay the forfeit in case you were not forthcoming when he returned. No doubt he thought I would sit up and keep watch over your slumbers, but we have a long and a hard ride before us on the morrow, and I did not close my eyes in sleep all last night. For the health of my own throat, I mean to keep you snugly enough, even without losing my rest. Just how depends upon you."

"Say what you mean at once," impatiently cried Carmela.

"You are a good Catholic, and know the penalty for breaking an oath when taken on the cross. Swear that you will make no attempt to escape us to-night, and you shall be left at ease—refuse, and I will bind you hand and foot."

Carmela hesitated, but only for an instant. "There is little hope of a feeble girl escaping from a force like yours, but it would be blasphemy to subscribe to an oath dictated by such dastardly ruffians."

"You prefer the bonds, then?"

"Yes. Let me have a blanket to shield me from the night air. That is the only favor I ask of you."

Carmela arose as she spoke, and as though looking for a more comfortable place to lie, drew near the cover where Tio Tomas was hidden. Gaspard shrugged his shoulders, but raised no objection as he removed the *serape* from his own person for her use.

"If you are uncomfortable through the night, blame yourself, not me. I must have my sleep, though the devil knocked at my door. Yet it is not too late, even now. Give me your pledge—"

For answer Carmela draped the *serape* about her, then held out her hands. With rapid dexterity Gaspard tied them together so that it would be impossible for her to release herself, yet without giving positive pain. Then Carmela sat down within arm's length of the bushes, and the ruffian bound her ankles after the same manner.

"Safe bind, safe find, is a good rule, but should you repent during the night, a word to the man on guard duty will procure you relief, lady," he added as he arose, and after a moment's pause, turned away toward the camp-fire.

"You acted precisely as you should, little one," came in a whisper from the bushes that screened the veteran gambusino from view. "When extorted by such villains, a broken oath would be no great crime, but now you need not be troubled even by such a feeble scruple."

"You heard what he—Manuel Camplido—said?" asked the maiden, keeping close watch upon the men by the camp-fire.

"Every word—and my finger itched terribly to send a bullet through his black heart! Only for your sake could I hold my hand," replied Tio Tomas, his voice trembling with passion.

"He has gone to carry out his diabolical revenge against Don Joaquin—your friend as well as mine, Tio Tomas. Only you can save him—and save him you must! Go at once—steal away and hasten to my friends. My aunt's house is the nearest. She is cold and hard, but she loved her brother, my poor father, and will spare no pains to avenge him. Go—tell her the whole truth—save Don Joaquin from the terrible doom that threatens him, then bring friends to rescue me from these ruffians. Go, as you love me, go!"

More than once Tio Tomas tried to edge in a word, but only when strong emotion and a lack of breath cut short her eager pleadings, could he make himself heard.

"I will do all that you say, little one, and more besides, but to act as you wish, would be fatal either to you or Don Joaquin—possibly to both. It would be day, long before I could reach the hacienda of Senora Isidora, and night again ere I could lead a force back here, much less to Don Joaquin's prison. You heard him say that a long and hard ride was in store for the morrow. You might be many a long mile from here when I returned, and following even a horse trail through a region like this, is a slow and delicate job."

"Go and save Don Joaquin—never think of

me—the blessed Virgin will guard and protect me from evil."

"Pardon, little one," said Tio Tomas, respectfully but firmly. "To serve you is my first duty—after that comes Don Joaquin. Nay—listen. The surest way to save him is to first rescue you. Once beyond the reach of these accursed *ladrones*, the rest will be easy. There would be doubt and hesitation when I told such a black story against a man like Don Manuel Camplido, but one word from your lips would raise the whole country in arms against him. Before he could learn, or even suspect the truth, he would be hemmed in beyond the possibility of escape."

Carmela was only partially convinced by this reasoning.

"You heard that ruffian say that I could appeal to the men on guard duty, should I find these bonds uncomfortable during the night. They would notice my absence, even should I succeed in stealing away, and by scattering in pursuit, we would soon be overtaken. I would be restored to captivity—you would be murdered, and thus the last hope for both Don Joaquin and myself be quenched. No, you must go at once and tell the black story of Manuel Camplido's foul treachery. By the duty you owe my family, I bid you go!"

"Were you to ask for my life, little one, I would lay it at your feet without a moment's hesitation, but for your own good, I must refuse you obedience in this respect. To comply would be almost certain ruin to all your hopes."

"I find a traitorous rebel, where I thought to find a friend!" bitterly uttered Carmela.

"You will feel sorry for those hard words, little one, when you have time to reflect on their injustice," was the simple reply, uttered with a native dignity that sharply pricked the conscience of the maiden, and she hastened to say:

"Pardon me, old friend. I hardly knew what I was saying. My brain is whirling—I am not fit to lead now—tell me how I must act, and I will obey you without a murmur."

A murmur of joy escaped the veteran as he gained his point, but his words were humble enough as he made reply:

"It is I who should ask forgiveness, little one, for daring to run counter to your wishes, but believe me, my advice is given for your best interests."

"Enough—I agree to follow your lead, but speak quick! Every moment lost now is worth a life's ransom!"

"Make haste slowly, has won more battles than it has lost," shrewdly replied the cool-headed veteran. "See! the rascals are preparing to turn in. A few minutes more patient waiting, and then we can get to work. Hush! that devil Gaspard is moving this way. If he suspects aught, be ready—"

His sibilant whisper died away as the tall chief of the *salladores* approached, but there was no occasion for special alarm. Gaspard only asked whether Carmela had changed her mind and was ready to give the required pledge, but quietly retired when the maiden coldly replied in the negative.

"Now listen," again whispered Tio Tomas. "Watch the rascals while I am speaking, and check me if any one seems to grow suspicious."

"I marked the spot where they put out their horses, and unless they are closely guarded, I can easily steal away a couple. If there be a horse-guard out, the job will be more difficult, but still it can be done. The animals once secured, I will come back here and lead you to them. Once in the saddle, we can laugh at the heathen, and need not draw rein again until you are safe with your friends, telling them the story that will weave a halter for the throat of that black-hearted dog, Manuel Camplido."

Tio Tomas spoke so confidently, and placed the part he was to perform in such a light that Carmela overlooked its really perilous nature, and as he reached forward to cut her bonds, she felt almost as good as rescued already.

Tio Tomas, despite his words, did not underestimate the danger he was incurring as he stole like a human serpent away from the cover that had rendered him such good service. He knew that the chances were against, rather than in favor of, his success, and he knew, too, that failure meant death. Yet he never hesitated for one moment. His life belonged to his young mistress, and he was ready to lay it down at any moment in her service.

He expected to find a horse-guard on duty, and therefore exercised to the utmost his really wonderful skill as a scout, taking advantage of every cover, and utilizing some that seemed hardly sufficient to shelter a rabbit. But his chagrin may be imagined when he saw, occupying a spot from whence a fair view could be obtained of all the animals, not one but a couple of Mexicans, seated close together, smoking and conversing in low tones.

"May the foul fiend fly away with them both!" he growled in a rage, grating his teeth together savagely as he lay under cover, not a score yards distant from the men who alone stood in the way of his success. "As if one guard was not enough—or if two, why placed nose to nose after that ridiculous fashion?"

The comment was quaint enough, all things

considered, but Tio Tomas had no thoughts of jesting in that emergency. He had expected to find a guard over the horses, and counted on having to use cold steel before all was ended, but he knew what rank folly it would be for him to think of killing these two stout fellows without letting an alarm reach camp, when the entire force would be upon him.

Snarling indistinctly through his teeth, the veteran lay under cover and racked his brain for some ruse which would divide the force he had encountered, but despite his efforts he could think of no expedient that promised success without also enlisting the main force of the enemy.

At length, in desperation, he fixed on a venture that promised a faint hope of success, but fortunately he was not called upon to put the project into execution. One of the Mexicans arose and stretched himself, with a prolonged yawn.

"I am sleepy as a dog, Perico, or I would keep you company longer. There's no need of watching the horses, but you must grin and bear it. Gaspard is the very devil when he has lost any sleep, and should you be caught off guard, I'd not give a peso for your lease of life. Adios!"

"As if other men didn't need rest, as well as he!" growled the horse-guard, discontentedly, as his friend moved away.

At any rate, he seemed resolved to take his comfort, and lighting a fresh cigar, he drew his *serape* closer around him, then settled down with his back to the boulder, his face toward the animals he was set to guard.

Slowly the minutes passed by, but Tio Tomas was well content to wait, for already he saw that sleep was stealing upon the man, his head slowly drooping forward, to be drawn erect with a sudden jerk that almost dislocated his neck. Twice this happened, the somnolent fellow growling and grumbling at his hard fate between spells, but then the heavy head sunk upon his breast and the cigar fell from his lips.

A grim, silent laugh revealed the teeth of the veteran as he drew a long knife and felt of its keen point and razor-like edge with his thumb, then noiselessly crept toward the luckless wretch whom he had doomed to death. A true Mexican, Tio Tomas felt small scruple against shedding blood when his interests demanded it, much less so now that he was working for the good of his idolized young mistress. Though he had known this man for years, had eaten and drank with him more times than he could number, and really felt a calm sort of friendship for him, despite the well known fact of his being an unscrupulous rascal, the pulse of the veteran gambusino beat calmly, and he felt not the faintest shade of regret at the thought of stabbing the fellow in his sleep. As he would have answered, it was all fate; the fate of one to slay, of the other to be slain, at that time and in that manner.

Crawling forward like a serpent, he raised upon his knees close to the boulder against which the sleeping man rested. One moment's pause to note the most favorable spot for the deadly steel to enter, then the glittering weapon descended, driven with all the force of his bony, shrunken yet powerful arm.

At the same moment his left hand was pressed firmly over the doomed guard's mouth, smothering the convulsive groan that rose gurgling in his throat. But that was all, save a slight, spasmodic quivering of the flesh and straightening of his limbs. Tio Tomas had handled cold steel too long to make botch-work when an opportunity was given him to deal a deliberate blow like this.

"You can sleep now, good Perico, and never fear the wrath of that son-of-a-devil Gaspard," Tio Tomas muttered with a low, grim chuckle as he drew the death-dealing steel from its bloody sheath and wiped the tarnished blade on the dead guard's shoulder. "Your guard duty is over in this world—may Satan give you as easy a task, when you gain the region below!"

He carefully propped the body against the boulder, then sunk flat upon his belly and crawled away to where he saw several saddles and bridles lying near. Securing two of each, he mounted them upon his back, then crawled back toward the spot he had mentally chosen while forced to lie inactive.

"It is not likely that there was more than one guard placed over the horses," he muttered, after a momentary hesitation. "But it is better to be too careful than not cautious enough. If the little one only does not grow impatient at the delay, and spoil everything by some rash move!"

Disincedering himself, Tio Tomas crept away to make sure that there were no more men watching the horses. This duty consumed some little time, for the storm-clouds were breaking away, and the bright face of the full moon was only obscured at brief intervals. The ground where the horses were picketed, was comparatively free from cover, and he was forced to choose his time carefully. But at length the circuit was completed, and Tio Tomas drew a long breath of relief as he found that Perico alone had been stationed as guard.

Creeping down into the natural corral, the veteran was not long in selecting the best two

horses of the lot, and cutting the lariat of the nearest, he led it cautiously back to where he had left the saddles and bridles. Equipping the animal rapidly, he fastened it and then returned for the other.

Now as before, Tio Tomas experienced but little difficulty in securing the animal he had chosen, and was soon on his way back to where he had left the first horse. But there a most disagreeable surprise awaited him.

As he stooped over for the saddle, a man rose from behind a boulder just ahead of him, and cried aloud:

"Hold! who the foul fiend are you, and what are you after?"

As though a hidden spring had been touched, the veteran rose erect. He saw that the man held a leveled revolver, pointed straight at his brain. But despite this, he flashed forth his knife, and with a howl of fury, leaped upon his antagonist, just as the pistol exploded.

CHAPTER XVI.

A TONGUELESS MAZEPPA.

TIO TOMAS felt more like a wild beast than a human being when he leaped upon the man who had so suddenly and unexpectedly risen between him and safety, just as he felt that the goal was as good as won. He did not pause to recognize the fellow, or even to make sure that he was a member of the gang under Gaspard. He saw the leveled revolver, heard the peremptory challenge uttered in a tone of voice that could not help reaching the ears of those who might still be awake around the campfire, and a mad thirst for blood such as he had never before experienced came over him. A howl of rage and a snarling curse broke from him as he leaped like a panther upon the man.

The bright glare of the exploding pistol blinded him, and he was dimly conscious of a stinging pain somewhere about his head, but just then a bullet through the brain could hardly have checked his mad ferocity in time to save the man. Swift as the lightning's flash fell and rose and fell again the gleaming steel. Fiercer than ever snarled the veteran *gambusino* as he felt that his weapon was sinking deep down into the seat of life. Again and again he struck, his weapon guided only by instinct, for the glare of burning powder still blinded his eyes. He even laughed aloud—a laugh even more blood-curdling than his cry of mad rage—as he heard his antagonist crying aloud for help. For the time being Tio Tomas was a madman, forgetting Carmela and her peril, alike with that which menaced himself.

The loud challenge was heard by the camp guard, and the closely-following pistol-shot brought each one of the sleepers also upon their feet, and then a swift rush carried them to where the death-struggle was still raging in all its fury.

The keenest eye could not readily detect friend from foe as the two men, both blood-covered and dusty, rolled over and over at their feet, but Gaspard called out:

"Lay hold and drag them apart, so we can tell which is which!"

He set the example himself, and strong hands were fastened upon the feet of the two men, and they were dragged forcibly apart.

"Mercy—for the love of God!" huskily rattled the one whom Gaspard held, and a cry of wonder parted the *salteadore's* lips.

"Antone—what the devil does all this mean?"

But no answer came to his question. The man—one of the most trusted of all his band—lay like one dead, blood oozing from a dozen wounds.

Those whose gripe had fastened upon Tio Tomas found their task far less easy. Despite the disadvantage at which he was held, he fought like a demon, howling and cursing with fury, ceasing only when his head was dashed violently against a corner of the boulder. Knocked senseless, his skull almost fractured, the old man lay a quivering heap at the feet of his captors.

"Who have you there, Diego—Cenobio?" demanded Gaspard, arising from beside his follower.

"The devil himself, judging from the way he kicked and fought!" growled one of the men addressed, nursing an ugly gash in his thigh. "An old man from his white hair—more than that, I can't say."

Gaspard bent over and wound his fingers in the white hair, raising the head until the veteran's face was exposed to the bright moonlight. For a moment the mingled blood and dirt confused the outlaw, but then a sounding curse burst from his lips as he recognized the old *gambusino*.

"Tio Tomas! what brought him here? I saw him fall to our shots, and believed him killed back yonder where we ambushed Don Felix. Who was it told me they saw him dead where he had crawled in the bushes?"

No answer came to this fierce question, and Gaspard did not press it just then.

"Bring them both over to the fire. All but five men come with me, four to carry these carcasses and one to watch the girl. There may be others hovering around us. Scatter and

search every foot of cover. Kill or capture every living being you find who don't belong to our party."

Gaspard was not one to spare himself or his men when he believed there was good cause for exertion, and in less than five minutes more the whole vicinity of the camp was under strict surveillance, which ceased only when he was satisfied that Tio Tomas had made the venture alone, or else that his accomplices had saved themselves by speedy flight. But one startling discovery was made, and, when Gaspard sounded the recall, the party bore back to the campfire with them the ghastly corpse of Perico, the horse guard.

Gaspard was in a white heat, nor was his rage at all appeased by what he saw as he returned to camp.

Carmela Felix had waited the result of Tio Tomas's bold venture with what patience she could summon. So full of hope had been the old man's words, that when the wild alarm rung out, rousing the sleeping *ladrones*, she was fairly stunned, only recovering her senses when she saw two men rudely dragging her old servant up to the fire. She saw his white hair gleam red in the rays of the freshened fire, and forgetting self, all save the misfortune of the veteran who had been reduced to this sad plight solely by his devotion to her, she arose and hastened to his side, unheeding the amazement of the outlaws at finding her limbs at liberty.

Tenderly she wiped the blood and dust from the face of Tio Tomas, then raised his head and sternly bade them hand her some water. If there was any hesitation, it was only momentary, for there was a glittering light in her dark eyes that compelled obedience.

Gently Carmela bathed the old man's face and head. She found a gash that laid bare the skull just above the right ear, which marked the track of the shot fired by Antone. Without a tremor she probed the hurt with her white finger, then gave a sigh of relief as she satisfied herself that the skull had escaped being fractured.

With a faint groan, Tio Tomas unclosed his eyes. He seemed unable to comprehend the situation, and there was a dull, vacant light in his eyes when Carmela spoke to him.

This was the sight that Gaspard saw when he returned to the camp, and his pent-up rage broke bonds in a fierce oath as he strode forward and placed a heavy hand upon the maiden's shoulder.

"You free! who dared set you at liberty without my orders?"

Either the sound of his voice, or the involuntary cry of pain which his rude grasp forced from Carmela's lips, acted like magic upon the veteran *gambusino*, and a wild yell of fury broke from his lungs as he leaped erect and sprung at the throat of the *salteadore*.

But now the old man had to deal with one to whom at his best he was but a child in comparison, and weakened by all that he had so recently undergone, he was quickly beaten back. A fierce effort forced him to the ground, then, with a ferocious laugh Gaspard knelt upon his chest and raised his murderous knife to cleave his heart. But the blow fell not then.

Gaspard's men stood by, rather enjoying the scene, and not offering to prevent the impending tragedy, but Carmela with a cry of indignation, snatched up a blazing brand and dealt the *ladrone* lieutenant a heavy blow upon the wrist that temporarily disabled him and knocked the knife out of his hand.

A murmur ran around the group, for they well knew the satanic temper of their superior when once fairly aroused, and they expected he would bitterly avenge the blow thus dealt. He leaped swiftly to his feet, but instead of curses, a short, mocking laugh was all as he rubbed the glowing sparks from his hand and wrist.

"A thousand thanks, senorita, for recalling me to my senses, though I very much doubt if Tio Tomas will thank you when he learns all. A knife-thrust, if given by a strong and experienced hand, makes a short and easy death—too merciful a doom for this rascal, who has killed two brave fellows, either one of whom was worth ten thousand such as he."

"He was acting in my behalf," said Carmela, with outward firmness, but with a dreadful sinking at her heart as she listened to his malignant tones. "The sin, if sin there be, is mine, since Tio Tomas only obeyed orders. If any one must be punished, let it fall upon me."

"Don Manuel Camplido will know how to deal with you on his return, never fear, lady," was the meaning reply. "You are beyond my jurisdiction, but not so this old fool. Hal! he set you free—he was stealing horses for your escape? I overlooked that for the moment, but he shall answer for it with the rest."

"Spare him—see!" and Carmela sunk upon her knees before the smiling villain. "I do what I would scorn for myself—I kneel and beg you to spare his life."

"You only waste your breath, lady," was the cold response. "He has slain two men—he must die."

Until now the man who had foiled Tio Tomas

even as success seemed assured, lay like one dead, but as Gaspard spoke, he raised himself on one elbow, and faintly gasped:

"I demand—the law of the band—to name penalty."

He was unable to say more, and his head fell back, a small quantity of frothy blood oozing through his tightly clinched teeth. But his meaning was perfectly clear to his comrades.

"You hear, lady! This is one of the most sacred laws we have, and has yet to be broken for the first time. Were Tio Tomas my brother I could do nothing to save him, now that Antone has spoken."

But Carmela was not yet conquered. She arose to her feet as Gaspard uttered this fiat, the movement bringing her close to him, and before he could suspect her desperate purpose, she snatched a revolver from his belt, cocked and thrust it almost against his breast.

"Spare his life or yours is forfeited, villain!" she cried sternly, and Gaspard knew that she was in deadly earnest. "Swear on the holy cross that he may leave this camp, alive and unharmed, with weapons and on horseback, or you die the death your dastardly crimes have deserved a thousand-fold!"

There was no one within arm's-length of Carmela save Gaspard himself, and none knew better than he that the desperate girl would slay him at the first move any of his men made to rescue him. Never before had he stood nearer death than at that moment, yet he never quailed, never even changed color. Instead, a low, mellow laugh parted his bearded lips.

"I admire your pluck, little lady, but it will avail you nothing. Unfortunately for your plans, you have taken the wrong pistol—one that has not been reloaded since the fight."

"Bah! do not think to deceive me by such a shallow trick. Take the oath I dictate, and at once, or you die!" cried Carmela, but her face grew a shade paler at his words, and keen-eyed Gaspard did not overlook this point in his favor.

"If you doubt my word, pull the trigger and see—ha!"

Carmela was convinced, and her hand trembled as she felt that she had played her last card, only to lose. Quick as thought Gaspard swept her hand aside, knocking the pistol from her grasp. As the weapon struck the ground it exploded!

With a diabolical laugh of exultation, Gaspard clasped her in his arms, holding her safe despite her struggles.

"Next time do not despise even the advice of an enemy, my little spitfire! Had you tried the trigger, as I bade you, I would now be bait for the buzzards. As it is—Diego, take her and bind her hands and feet. She is too full of mischief to be allowed even so much liberty."

For the moment the maiden's proud spirit seemed utterly broken, for she made not the slightest resistance when Gaspard turned her over to the care of the young Mexican.

"Now Antone, your turn. Can you speak?"

"Brandy!" faintly gasped the dying outlaw.

Without a word, Gaspard held a flask of liquor to his lips, and the wounded man nearly drained its contents ere he relinquished his grasp. As so often happens in similar cases, the fiery liquor lent the dying man a factitious strength, acting with wonderful quickness, but neither he nor his comrades were deceived by what their rough experience had enabled them to frequently note, and he spoke with feverish impatience as Gaspard propped him up against a roll of blankets:

"Quick! I must see him punished before I die—haste!"

"As soon as you name the penalty, it shall be inflicted."

"Bring my horse—it is hot and high-spirited enough. The son-of-a-devil wanted a ride, and he shall have it!" uttered Antone with a hollow laugh that sounded truly diabolical.

Gaspard frowned, and glanced swiftly over the circle of faces. They, too, were shadowed, and their eyes sought each other with the same doubt that filled those of their leader.

"Do you hesitate?" cried Antone, with remarkable energy for a dying man. "You dare not! The law is sacred—one and all you are solemnly sworn to abide by it!"

"We have not yet refused," coldly responded Gaspard. "Go on and finish what you have to say. What is the punishment you demand for your death?"

"You shall bind the rascal upon the bare back of my horse, his head to its tail. You will bind the horse, and put a spine of cactus under its tail, then turn it loose."

"You forget one point in the very law you appeal to," said Gaspard, with a cold smile.

"It expressly states that no person shall demand a penalty that, in being executed, shall seriously endanger the lives or liberty of any of his loyal comrades."

"Nor do I ask it—" impulsively cried Antone, only to be interrupted by his superior.

"Tio Tomas is no chicken, no fool, but a tough, hard-headed and cool-witted rascal. Such men do not die easy. True, on a blind horse, and bound in the manner you say, he would not have more than one chance in a hundred of

escaping with life—but that chance is one too many. He knows too much for us to run the slightest risk. Let him tell what he has seen this day, and the price of hempen rope would double itself. No, Antone, you must be satisfied with some less romantic revenge."

A low, bitter laugh came from the dying outlaw.

"You do not know how a man like me can hate when he is brought to death's door, and knows that he can wreak a bitter revenge upon the one who laid him low. Tio Tomas shall die, and as I said. You cut me short before I had finished the sentence."

"You all know Tio Tomas—many of you have known him for years. How many of you have ever heard him read or write?"

The outlaws interchanged quick glances, and their faces lightened up, for now they began to understand more clearly.

"No one," responded Gaspard. "He can do neither."

"Good! bring my horse here and prepare to carry out my orders to the very letter. Even should Tio Tomas escape with his life from their little pleasure ride, be sure he will never betray us, for before we bid him adieu, I will cut out his tongue, roast it and then force it down his own throat!"

For a brief space the outlaws, blood-stained and crime-hardened as they were, stood aghast at this truly diabolical speech. None of them were saints, all brutal and ferocious as a life training in crime could make them, yet this devilish proposal took them by surprise and for the moment awed them.

But only for a moment. It would be a new sensation. They all hated the honest old gambusino. His life meant danger if not death to them. Then there was the sacred law of the band to which they had all subscribed. This remembrance was the hair that turned the scale, and a wild cheer arose as they joined in the satanic laugh raised by the dying man.

"Good!" cried Gaspard, his white teeth gleaming wolfishly in the firelight. "A tongueless Mazeppa! What think you of that, Tio Tomas?" as he turned to where the old man still lay.

There was no reply, only a glare of deadly hatred from the veteran's eyes. He knew that he was doomed to death, and resolved that he would not add to the triumph of his enemies by pleading for the mercy which he knew would be denied him.

"Bring up the horse, some of you!" cried Gaspard, his worst passions in the ascendancy, and eager to witness the punishment inflicted. "Now Antone, here is a knife—the very one the old villain carved you so neatly with. See if you can use it as deftly."

As he spoke, Gaspard grasped Tio Tomas by the throat and dragging him to where the dying outlaw sat, forced him to his knees. The men came up, leading a young and spirited horse, and all crowded around to witness the horrible deed.

Antone flourished the steel, still stained with his own blood, before the face of the old man, but Tio Tomas never flinched, his black eyes looking defiant hatred into those of his enemy.

Antone grasped him by the beard and wrenched his mouth open, but just at that instant came a startling interruption.

CHAPTER XVII.

PHANTOMS OF THE NIGHT.

JOAQUIN uttered a fierce, wild cry as he saw the noose of his lasso close around the throat of Pedro Canales, and felt the sudden pluck that jerked the drunken rascal off his feet and upon the table as the young Sonorian wheeled his horse and dashed back across the court-yard to the great gates.

The fellow-servants of the doomed man stood as though petrified when Joaquin entered and uttered his bold defiance, but when Pedro Canales was lassoed and dragged helplessly the length of the table, scattering wine flasks and cups, abject terror seized upon them one and all, and there was a general rush for cover, the majority diving under the heavy table where they hoped to escape the doom which had overtaken their chief, for that one night.

But this panic was only of brief duration. As the daring deed was not promptly followed up by a general attack, hot rage began to take the place of abject fear, and gradually the wild, angry shout of blood for blood arose. First the boldest men crept forth from beneath the table, and their example lent the remainder the necessary nerve. No one demurred when Sanchez the One-eyed assumed command.

"Get arms and then to horse, comrades!" he shouted as he rushed from the building. "If too late to save the life of our friend, at least we can avenge his death!"

Joaquin Murieta had anticipated hot and speedy pursuit, if indeed he was ever permitted to leave the court-yard alive. Yet, had he known that his own death must pay the forfeit, he would not then have paused for a second thought, so intensely bitter was the memory of the indignities he had suffered when temporarily helpless in the brutal grasp of Pedro Canales. All was forgot save that blind, unreason-

ing thirst for vengeance, and as his good horse dashed through the great gates at full speed, dragging a fearful clog behind it, Joaquin laughed long and loud, an unearthly echo in his voice that spoke of incipient madness.

In that moment was born the spasmodic fury for lack of a better term—which in after days rendered the name of Joaquin Murieta a terror on the Pacific slope. At such times he was a madman, whose devilish thirst only human blood could quench. Those who knew him best, declare it their belief that he was no more responsible for what he did in such moments, than any wild beast that had been baited to fury and madness.

On this occasion, as on those which it foreshadowed, the terrible outburst was of brief duration, and Joaquin suddenly drew rein, glancing over his shoulder to where lay the dead and mutilated mass which had once been Pedro Canales.

A convulsive shudder ran over his frame, and his head was raised to cast the lasso with its horrible weight from off his saddle-bow, but at that moment came a fresh outburst of fury from the direction of the corrals.

Among the shouts and yells Joaquin could detect black and bitter threats against himself as the comrades of Pedro Canales hastily led forth their horses, and the dark, ugly scowl again disfigured his countenance. The outburst of emotional insanity had passed away, but with it also vanished the manly regrets for that terrible revenge he had inflicted, and after that night's work, Joaquin Murieta was a greatly changed man, for then he first realized how sweet was revenge for revenge's own sake.

"If they will hunt the jaguar, let them beware his claws!"

The words fell from his lips with a fierce distinctness that caused the young Sonorian to start as though some other person had uttered them, then, with a short laugh at his stupidity in failing to recognize his own voice, Joaquin cast a swift and comprehensive glance around him.

During all the evening a storm had been threatening in the heavens, black clouds chasing one another in broken masses athwart the round face of the moon. Such was still the case, though in a lesser degree, and Joaquin knew that the storm had passed them by for the time being.

A dare-devil thought struck him as the bright moon sailed from under a cloud, and gathering up his reins, he glanced back to where the retainers of Don Manuel Camplido were pouring forth from the corrals. A clear yell of mocking defiance poured from his lungs, and as an angry response floated back to his ears, he shook aloft his clinched right hand and shouted aloud:

"I am Joaquin Murieta! Follow me ye who dare—but all who come will never return on their own feet!"

The odds were more than a score to one, and that score with their brains fired by strong drink. Wild yells and fierce curses rent the air as, with one accord, they plied their quirts and thundered away over the level plain, eager to drink the heart's blood of the audacious avenger. They could see that the body of Pedro Canales still hung at the end of the lasso that had torn him from their midst, making great bounds as the speed of the fugitive's horse increased, and this soul-sickening sight but increased their lust for vengeance.

Joaquin laughed aloud as he heard them, for he knew that he had but to cut or slip the lasso with its dread weight that acted as a drag, in order to easily distance the best and swiftest footed animal among his pursuers, but the fact that the leading men were slowly gaining on him, gave him not the slightest uneasiness. Swiftly as he had decided, it was not without fully weighing all the chances, pro and con, and though his enemies were but fairly warming up to the chase, he knew that it was rapidly drawing to an end.

A swift glance upward showed him a dense cloud of considerable extent, just beginning to creep over the face of the full moon, and a grim smile curled his lip as the glance was turned backward at his pursuers. They were riding hard on his track, already strung out as the swiftest horses forged ahead—then all vanished in the gloom.

Joaquin, as a lure, laughed long and loudly as he kept on his former course, but then wheeled abruptly to the left and put his horse to full speed, the muffled hoofs only giving out a dull, thumping sound that no ear could distinguish more than two score yards away.

For several hundred yards Joaquin raced thus, then once more described an acute angle to the left, now riding direct for the rancho itself, by a course lying parallel to that of his pursuers!

Drawing up his horse to a walk, Joaquin bent over in the saddle and listened intently. A grim smile showed his teeth as he heard the rapid thumping of many hoofs on the sandy soil, and as he strained his keen eyes through the gloom, he could just distinguish his enemies, like links in some gigantic chain, or phantom of the night blindly chasing a will-o'-the-wisp!

"They half believe me a devil now—when yonder cloud rolls away and they can see naught human before them, they will know I am a fiend!" he muttered with a low, hard laugh, as he once more urged his good horse on.

As the irregular outlines of the rancho and its outbuildings loomed up before him, Joaquin made sure that his weapons were in working order, then rode fearlessly up to the great gate, pausing beneath the stone archway and pulling in the weighty lasso, hand over hand. When sufficient slack was gained, he loosened the end from the saddle-bow, and cast it over the archway. Securing it again, he fastened it to the pommel, then rode slowly away, only pausing when he saw the mangled corpse of Pedro Canales clear of the ground and dangling beneath the arch.

Thanks to the rough masonry, it was no great task for Joaquin to hold the body in place while taking in the lasso hand over hand as his horse slowly approached the gate, and then knotting the rope firmly, the deed was done, just as the heavy cloud rolled away from the moon whose clear beams lighted up all surrounding objects with almost the distinctness of noonday.

Joaquin laughed harshly as he surveyed the grim evidence of his vengeance.

"No doubt but what the story will spread far and fast enough, but there is one to whom it must speak louder than to others," he muttered, producing pencil and paper and hastily writing:

"Let the fate of this miserable tool warn Don Manuel Camplido how strictly I keep my oaths. On this corpse, I swear to hang the master of this rancho in the same manner, from his own gateway, within one week from date."

"Signed

JOAQUIN MURIETA."

Impaling the note on his knife-blade, he drove the weapon to its hilt in the breast of the dangling carcass, then wheeled his horse and rode swiftly away.

Far away over the plains he could just distinguish those who had set out to avenge Pedro Canales, huddled in a close group, no doubt discussing his mysterious vanishment. A grim smile curled his lip, but Joaquin felt no particular desire for their closer acquaintance, just then, and bearing to the left, they were soon lost to view.

His dread vengeance accomplished, there came reaction.

The future looked very black to the young Sonorian.

He knew that his beloved Carmela was a captive in the power of Don Manuel Camplido—knew that she had been captured while on the way to her aunt's hacienda; but beyond that he was all at sea, and hardly knew which way to turn. Alone, it did not seem possible for him to accomplish anything, without a more definite clew to work upon, and he dare not apply for aid to any of the rancheros, for he doubted not that the black calumny had been spread far and wide. Should he make such a venture, he would be seized and held as a murderous outlaw, if indeed the popular indignation did not culminate in his speedy hanging for the murder of Don Carillo Felix.

"To Don Manuel Camplido I owe it all—ten thousand curses rest upon his head!" he cried aloud, half-crazed by the terrible situation in which he found himself. "If I can only find him—only meet him face to face on equal terms, with no one to interfere—I ask no more of fate!"

A sort of stupor crept over him. The reins fell upon the neck of his horse, his head drooped forward upon his chest, and his almost nerveless form swayed unsteadily in the saddle at each movement of his horse, like that of a drunken man. And such would one in ignorance of the facts have deemed him.

A stouter-hearted man than Joaquin Murieta was at that date, never drew the breath of life, yet when all that he had undergone during the last thirty hours he remembered, the wonder is not that he failed now, but that he had upheld so long against such odds. First the trial of skill with Don Manuel Camplido and the quarrel which followed—and there is a much greater waste of bodily strength as will power, in facing and cowering a score of armed enemies, even if they be cowardly, than the careless reader may believe—then the interview with Carmela, the bitter insults of Don Felix and the after encounter with Don Luis, where he had to fight harder against himself than against the brother of his loved one. Then came the night surprise and capture, the deadly struggle with Pedro Canales ending in being dragged by the neck—but why recapitulate! In that brief time, as measured by hours and minutes, the young Sonorian, only a boy, after all, had undergone enough to utterly break down the strongest veteran. Add to it all that neither bite nor sup had passed his lips since noon of the previous day, and there can be no marvel at his falling into a stupor that unnerved mind and body alike.

How long he rode thus, Joaquin Murieta never knew, but he was aroused to consciousness by a thorny limb coming in contact with his face, and instinctively he caught up the bridle-reins and checked his horse.

As he stared half-vacantly around him, Joa-

quin saw that he was near the outskirts of a small patch of timber. The moonlight was sufficient to reveal this, but beyond that, he was all at sea, and turned his horse to clear the cover, knowing that a short survey of the surrounding country would soon enable him to place himself.

Scarcely had he worked clear of the bushes when the dull beating of a horse's hoofs in full gallop upon the sandy soil startled him, and like magic Joaquin was himself again, every sense fully aroused and on the alert.

There was no need to search for the rider. He was passing abreast of the timber island, not more than two hundred yards away. Short though the distance by daylight, the moon seemed to cast a peculiar haze about the horseman that rendered the outlines indistinct and phantom-like. Yet at the first glance, Joaquin's heart gave a great bound, his eyes filled with the same deadly light that Pedro Canales barely had time to notice ere the death-noose closed around his throat, and his breath came fast and hot as he believed he recognized the horseman—that fate had listened to his bitter prayer, and now threw Don Manuel Camplido across his path with none to interfere! And a shrill, mad yell nearly split his throat as he buried the rowels of his spurs in the flanks of his horse, and leaped forward in chase.

Yet it must have been instinct rather than eyesight that served him, for the phantom-like rider was indeed Don Manuel Camplido, on his way to his rancho, after the parting with his fair captive which the reader has witnessed.

The ex-captain of lancers heard that mad yell—saw the wild rider burst out from the shadowy haze which surrounded the *motte*, and knew that he was the object of that impetuous charge. He did not recognize the horseman—did not pause for a second glance to learn his identity or to see whether or no he had companions. A coward born, he thought only of finding safety in flight. His horse was jaded, but the rancho was not so far distant, and if he could hold his own for a half-score miles, all would be well.

Scarcely had this remembrance flashed upon him, when a summons came from the rear that fairly curdled his blood with horror, for he now knew the avenger on his track!

"Halt! cowardly dog and son-of-a-dog!" cried the young Sonorian, his voice ringing out like the tramp of doom. "Halt! Don Manuel Camplido—I am Joaquin Murieta! Turn and face me like a man, or I will kill you as you run!"

Perhaps the race would have ended sooner had Joaquin been content to pursue in silence, for after that first brief stupor, Camplido plied both spurs and whip in frantic fear. At no time would he have dared to meet a man like the vaquero in deadly combat on anything like equal terms, much less now, when Joaquin had risen like a ghost out of the night, miles from where he supposed him lying in irons, a helpless captive, subject to his evil will. There seemed to be something supernatural about it, and Don Manuel was bathed in a cold perspiration from head to foot as he urged his snorting horse on in mad flight.

As though realizing his error, Joaquin did not repeat his challenge, but devoted every energy to overhauling his craven enemy. Once again were the equestrian rivals pitted against each other, but now the conditions were more equal. There was no Pedro Canales near to alter the fiat of fortune. Above them the clear and now cloud-free moon, before them a broad, sandy level. The best horse must win, for of the men there could be no comparison. And yet a cornered coward will sometimes fight desperately and to the bitter end.

With a degree of fierce joy that no words can fitly describe, Joaquin saw that he was gaining ground, slowly but surely. Either his horse was the superior animal, or less wearied—perhaps both. Don Manuel was assuredly getting every ounce of work out of his mount, for he felt that he was riding for life!

Time and again did Joaquin raise his cocked revolver as he drew on the fugitive until only a few rods separated them, but as often was his hand lowered. Not that he doubted his skill. Even by that uncertain light, he could have sent ball after ball home to the black heart of the wretch before him, but as often there came to him the memory of Carmela Felix and her peril. The villain should die, but not at once. He must be made to confess all, first.

Don Manuel Camplido knew that he was steadily being overhauled, for he could hear the rapid thud of hoofs drawing nearer and nearer, yet he could not pluck up courage enough to draw his pistols and fire upon his enemy. His failing horse had already stumbled more than once. To relax his gripe upon the reins might be fatal to his hopes, faint as those were, and shivering with mortal terror, he still plied the merciless quirt, still scored the bloody flanks with his spurs.

But his most desperate efforts could not long protract the unequal race. Joaquin struck his noble mount twice with the whip, then dropped it and leaned far forward as he forged alongside his enemy, making a swift and sure grasp at the reins, then drew himself erect in the sad-

dle, halting the fugitive's horse in its track by an exertion of strength that seemed more than mortal.

"At last, Don Manuel Camplido!" he cried, his voice ringing with a deadly exultation, his handsome countenance transformed to that of a veritable demon by bitter passions.

Don Manuel read his doom in those blazing eyes, and a snarling curse hissed through his tightly clinched teeth as he drew his saber and made a savage blow at his rival.

Once again nothing but his marvelous quickness could have saved Joaquin from death. The savage attack was wholly unexpected, but he swiftly threw himself to one side, and the keen weapon, instead of taking effect as its owner intended, struck the horse ridden by Joaquin on the neck with such force that its head was nearly severed from its body!

CHAPTER XVIII.

"CONFESS ALL, OR DIE!"

ALMOST decapitated, the horse ridden by Joaquin Murieta gave one spasmodic plunge forward, then fell heavily together with the young Sonorian, who was unable to recover his balance in time to prevent his own fall. Luckily he managed to free his feet from the stirrups and escape from being crushed beneath the body of the death-stricken animal. Don Manuel Camplido, the fury of despair still upon him, sought to follow up the advantage thus unexpectedly gained, and urged his jaded horse forward, his blood-stained saber flashing in the moonlight as he dealt a second blow at Joaquin, who was just scrambling to his feet. But once more he was doomed to bitter disappointment—and worse.

Catlike, Joaquin avoided the stroke, the same motion carrying him under and beyond the horse ridden by his enemy. And then, before Don Manuel Camplido could recover his balance, destroyed by the force of his unresisted blow, the young Sonorian leaped into the air and alighted on the croup of his adversary's horse.

Uttering a howling curse of angry despair, Don Manuel swung his keen weapon around, but Joaquin caught his wrist and tore the saber from his grasp, hurling it far away. Then his sinewy fingers closed about Camplido's throat like the stern gripe of relentless fate.

"Dog—devil—you are mine—mine at last!" he hissed, his voice more like that of a demon than the man whom Don Manuel Camplido had formerly known.

Fiercer and more deadly grew his grasp, and, though he felt himself but a child in the gripe of the youth whom he had so bitterly wronged, Don Manuel made one more effort to save himself—and failed! Yet the struggle was sufficient to destroy their balance, and the rivals fell headlong from the back of the horse, who made a few frightened bounds, then stood still with drooping head and heaving flanks.

Joaquin made no attempt to save himself, but clung to the throat of his enemy like a leech, nor did the shock, as they struck the ground heavily, separate them. That horrible lust for blood was again upon him, and for the time being he was more demon than man.

Not until the form of Don Manuel Camplido lay in his grasp like a mass of lifeless clay did the blood-red mist that danced before his vision fade away—not until then did Joaquin remember that through the confession of this man alone could he hope to learn aught of Carmela Felix.

Again that strong reaction overtook him, and if the ghastly, distorted countenance into which he gazed so anxiously, was not already that of a dead man, Don Manuel Camplido was insured a fresh lease of life. Where Joaquin had tried his utmost to destroy, he now sought to restore by every means in his power, and after a space of almost breathless doubt and anxiety his efforts were rewarded.

A husky, spasmodic groan, and then Don Manuel Camplido fully opened his eyes. He was like one dazed, and uncertain whether he was in this world or the next, but then his eyes fell upon the dark face bending over him, and a hollow groan of utter despair told that reason had returned.

"Curse you!" he gasped, "why did you not finish your work—why bring me back to life when I had passed all the bitterness of death?"

The dark, handsome face above him, lightened up with a smile that was almost satanic, fitly matching the short, hard laugh that bore it company.

"Bah! did you think my vengeance could be so easily satisfied? You say you have suffered all the bitterness of death; poor fool! the time is near when you will recall this experience with regret—when its memory will seem like a taste of heaven's purest bliss in comparison with the tortures you then endure! Instead of one, you shall suffer the agony of ten thousand deaths, and as you finally yield to the horrible strain, I will curse myself for having so poorly satisfied the hatred I bear you!"

"Mercy, demon—for you cannot be a man like—"

"I am what you and yours made me, dog!" hoarsely cried Joaquin, his sinewy fingers hovering close to his wretched rival's throat.

"Until your blows fell, where was a happier, lighter-hearted youth than I? But I chanced to cross your path. You were rich and powerful, I poor and standing all alone in the world. You thought it would be so easy to brush me aside forever, and you made the attempt. But I still live, and you—you sowed the wind, and now you must reap the whirlwind!"

"I was wrong—I see it now—but I will make amends. I am rich—name your price—"

"The last drop of blood from your black heart!" fiercely interrupted Murieta. "True, you shall make amends, but it must be when and as I choose. Little by little I will extort payment of the measureless debt you owe me. But first, as the shadow of atonement, you shall acknowledge the truth of this foul plot against Don Felix and his daughter—"

While Joaquin was speaking, a sudden change came over Don Manuel Camplido for he believed that one chance was left him which, if rightly managed, might insure him both life and liberty. The thought inspired him with a sort of desperation, and he interrupted his rival with a hollow laugh.

"Kill me—murder me, and by doing so, dash your dearest hopes to the ground forever!" he cried, hoarsely.

A no less complete change came over the young Sonorian. The malignant scowl faded away, and a smile took its place—a smile, yet so truly diabolical even in its gentleness, that Don Manuel felt his blood curdle with renewed horror.

"So! even a worm will turn when trodden upon!" and Joaquin coughed softly. "Will you kindly explain your words?"

The desperate villain shuddered, for that seeming mirth was more terrible to him than the fiercest outburst of rage, but he mustered up courage enough to reply:

"Upon my life hangs that of Carmela Felix. I left her in the hands of men who know no will but mine. If aught disastrous happens to me, or if I fail to return within a certain time, she will be put to death. Knowing this, you will not harm me, or even hold me prisoner."

"Indeed!" sneered the young Sonorian. "Every word you utter is a lie. You had no thought of personal danger when you left the lady. You believed me a helpless captive in your foul dungeon, and your plans were so carefully laid that none save your comrades in evil could ever suspect the truth, consequently you left no such orders. But even granting that you *did* so order, the remedy is simple enough. You will give me an order on your ruffians for the lady—"

"Never!" cried Don Manuel Camplido desperately.

"Never is a strong word, and should not be spoken lightly," softly laughed Joaquin. "Especially by a man occupying your critical position. Peculiar arguments can be brought to bear, and if managed rightly, cannot fail to convince you that obstinacy is a sad mistake."

"You mean to torture me?"

"I mean to make you confess the whole truth—yes."

"You will give me life and liberty if I tell all?"

"I make no terms with such as you, Don Manuel," was the cold response. "You shall speak out, freely or by force. After that we will discuss the end of all."

Don Manuel Camplido said no more, but relapsed into a sullen silence, seemingly yielding to his fate, yet covertly watching for an opening by taking advantage of which he might possibly turn the tables on his enemy. It came sooner than he expected.

Joaquin turned his head toward the spot where his dead horse lay, and the bright moonbeams fell upon the polished haft of a knife at his waist. Swift as thought Camplido made a grasp at this, and as he felt the weapon come away in his hand, he made a vicious stroke at Joaquin's heart. But he had to deal with one who was never more on guard than when seemingly wholly off it, and the keen weapon only slit open the young Sonorian's shirt as its wearer, warned by the pluck at his girdle, twisted his lithe body to one side. And then a revolver butt fell heavily upon the desperate villain's head, knocking him back senseless.

First satisfying himself that this unconsciousness was genuine, Joaquin replaced his weapons and arose, sweeping his limited horizon with an eagle glance. Nothing human was in sight save his enemy and himself.

"Yet it would not be safe," he muttered, thoughtfully. "The rancho is only a few miles away, and few eyes will be locked in slumber there this night! The villain, coward though he is, knows that his only hope lies in keeping close the information I seek, and love of life would lend him strength to bear considerable torture before yielding. It will take both time and patience—and there I would fail. Let me begin to taste my revenge, and I feel that I would go mad—I would lose all self-control, and never let up until I had drained his heart dry!"

There was the possibility, too, of being interrupted by some of Don Manuel's friends or followers, and the rancho was not so far distant

but that the cries and shrieks of one being put to the torture might reach the ears of his servants. An investigation, open or secret, would be made, and Joaquin run the risk of losing the reward he was toiling for, even at the last moment.

Joaquin did not long stand in doubt. Cutting the bridle reins of his dead horse, he rolled Don Manuel Campido over upon his face, then drawing his arms back bound them firmly at both elbows and wrist. His rough and ready method of handling served to restore the ranchero's scattered senses, and he began to struggle feebly.

"Quiet, dog!" and Joaquin's foot bore heavily upon his neck, pressing his face deep into the loose sand. "I have humored you for the last time. Attempt to make me any more trouble, and, by the virgin of Atocha, I swear to cripple you so that any further offense will be impossible!"

The tone in which they were uttered, more than the words themselves, quelled the prisoner, and as his stiffened muscles relaxed, Joaquin removed his foot, stooped and grasping Don Manuel by the collar, raised him to his knees.

"Now listen to me, Don Manuel Campido, and bear in mind that every word I now utter is as good as sworn to.

"I am about to convey you to a safe spot, where you can be made to confess all, if you remain obstinate and refuse to make a clean breast of your own accord. You shall tell the foul plot from beginning to end, shall acknowledge the black lies which you have caused to be spread about me, and you shall give me full information concerning the Senorita Carmela Felix, her present whereabouts, who holds her in charge, and with what force. There may be other questions put, but these are the principal points. If you confess openly, so much the better for you. Refuse, and you will bitterly curse the hour of your birth, for all the tortures that human brain can invent, or mortal hands inflict, will be showered upon you. You will be given no respite until you have confessed, and if necessary the torture will be prolonged, not only for hours, but for days—and each moment shall be even more bitter to you than death itself!"

Joaquin paused, but Don Manuel made no reply. Indeed his tongue would have refused him utterance had he made the attempt. He could only tremble and shiver as though under an icy shower bath, yet all the time his throbbing veins seemed filled with molten metal.

In a colder, more measured tone, Joaquin added:

"I tell you this without reserve, so that you may weigh the situation well before the moment comes when you must finally decide. Then there will be no argument. I will simply place the alternative before you—confess all or die! The only point for you to consider is this: whether you prefer confession with torture or without."

Turning on his heel, Joaquin strode toward the horse ridden by Don Manuel, but before he reached the animal, he heard the fear-maddened villain leap to his feet and rush away at full speed. It was a foolish venture, for escape was impossible, and the young Sonorian laughed mockingly as he leaped into the saddle and took the coiled lasso from where it hung around the high pommel.

A touch of the spurs, and the horse stretched out in pursuit, and jaded though it was, the hampered fugitive was rapidly overhauled. Swiftly the snake-like coils whirled through the moonlight and with a choking cry, Don Manuel Campido was hurled to the ground.

For one moment that devilish lust for blood overmastered the young Sonorian, and he wheeled his horse to dash away and drag his captive to death, but the pale face of Carmela rose before him, and the mad impulse fled.

CHAPTER XIX.

PUTTING THE QUESTION.

AS soon as he recovered his self-command, Joaquin rode up to where Don Manuel Campido lay, partially stunned by his fall, yet with consciousness enough left to understand the words addressed him.

"Get up, boy!" sternly cried the young Sonorian, jerking sharply on the lasso. "Let this convince you that escape is impossible—that you are doomed to suffer the full penalty of your crimes. Up, I say! else I will lash the flesh from off your bones!"

Feebly the wretched rascal arose, staggering like a drunken man, the picture of misery. But Joaquin was not touched by pity; instead, the depth of degradation and despair into which his merciless enemy had been cast, was to him but a faint foretaste of the exquisite revenge in store.

Leaning over in the saddle, he raised the lasso-oose from about Don Manuel's shoulders and fitted it closely around his neck, laughing fiercely as he said:

"Last night I was led at a horse's tail in a like manner by your men, doubtless by your orders. The tables are turned now; see how you relish a dose of your own medicine, Senor Don Manuel Campido!"

The miserable captive made no answer to this taunting speech. For the time being his spirit was utterly crushed.

Shortening the lariat so that Don Manuel was forced to walk close to the horse's heels, Joaquin cast one keen glance around him, then another at the twinkling stars above them. These evidently gave him all the information he needed concerning the course he must pursue in order to reach the goal he had in his mind's eye, for he urged his horse forward at a rapid walk, paying not the slightest attention to the wretched being who was forced to exert himself to keep from being dragged from his feet and suffocated.

A more exquisite mental torture could hardly have been devised for the proud, haughty Spaniard. In like manner were sometimes punished refractory slaves and the lowest class of criminals. A thousand times he was tempted to fling himself down and end it all—but as often his ingrained cowardice restrained him. Yet there was not one ray of hope to which he might look forward for encouragement. He was helpless in the power of a man whom he had deeply wronged and ruthlessly abused—a man whose capacity for hatred and love of revenge was at least equal to his own. He knew that Joaquin Murieta had not uttered an idle threat when he swore that the only alternative was confession or torture. In either event he felt that his death was assured, yet he could not muster up courage enough to end all at once. The craven wretch felt that life was worth living, even with a rope around his neck, and being thus led at a horse's tail.

As the horse he bestrode gradually recovered its wind, Joaquin pressed along at a more rapid rate, keeping Don Manuel at a rapid dog-trot, and only slackening his pace from time to time lest he should defeat his own ends by strangling his prisoner.

It was a barbarous revenge, and one possibly not wholly justified by the facts given, but the young Sonorian had suffered terribly both in body and mind. It was a retaliation in kind, strongly characteristic of the day and country.

For two hours or more the journey lasted, when rough and broken ground was reached, where the horse was forced to pick its way at a slow walk. This respite was most welcome to the wretched captive, who was now more dead than alive. Only the awful horror which he felt of death had enabled him to bear up so long. His limbs seemed heavy as though composed of lead, yet every motion sent acute pains tingling along each nerve and muscle, until he could have shrieked out in agony, only breath was so precious and his parched throat would only suffer faint, gasping groans to pass.

At length Joaquin drew rein, and the instant he did so, Don Manuel fell in a heap, utterly exhausted. Even to save his life he could not have risen to his feet unaided.

"Good!" muttered Joaquin, as he glanced down at the miserable creature. "It will make our work easier when we come to put the question. Now if they are only at home!"

Putting a finger in his mouth, Joaquin gave vent to a long, peculiarly modulated whistle, then, after a brief pause, uttered the cry of the prowling jaguar, twice repeating the startling sound with marvelous fidelity to nature.

Before him rose a nearly perpendicular mass of rock, wreathed and festooned with climbing plants, and midway up this the eyes of the young Sonorian were fixed. There were no visible signs of a human habitation, yet he evidently expected an answer to his wild signaling. Nor was he disappointed.

From above, apparently at or near the spot on which his impatient regards were fixed, there sounded the spitting snarl of a wild cat.

"Enough, Miguel—Serapio!" Joaquin called out. "It is I—Joaquin Murieta—and in need of your help."

An eager exclamation greeted this announcement, and the form of a man shot swiftly down the face of the rock. His hand grasped that of the young Sonorian with an ardor that evidenced the power of the friendship existing between them.

"Miguel is up yonder, asleep, senor," said the man, at the same time giving a glance of curiosity to the shapeless mass at the end of the lasso. "You were lucky to find us at home. We only got in from a long hunt at sunset. But we are ready and equal to whatever service you may need—be sure of that!"

His tone was hearty as his words, and Joaquin knew that he could place full dependence on them.

"I knew you would not fail me in time of need, old friend. I do not think the task will be a hard one, though the results may be of the greatest importance to me, and to one far dearer than even my own life. You see that fellow?"

"A man, is he?" and Serapio bent over the shapeless mass. "He looks as though he had seen hard times—Soul of the devil! It is Don Manuel Campido!" he exclaimed, with a start.

"Ay! Don Manuel Campido and my deadliest enemy," coolly uttered Joaquin. "The service I ask of you and Miguel is connected with him. That does not frighten you?"

"Not enough to turn my hair gray. Say what you wish, and it is done, even though you ask for his scalp, hide and all!"

"It may come to that in the end," seriously answered the young Sonorian. "But first, let us get him up to the den. Then I will explain all to you and Miguel."

Serapio said no more, but cast off the lasso from around Don Manuel's neck, then cast the limp carcass over his shoulder with an ease that seemed incredible in one of his medium build. Advancing to the foot of the cliff, he grasped the rude rope ladder by which he had descended, and slowly mounted upward, holding the body steady by fixing his strong teeth upon Don Manuel's clothing.

Joaquin stripped bridle and saddle from the jaded animal, feeling assured that it would not wander far, then followed Serapio up to the strange dwelling of his friends.

He found Miguel awake, replenishing the fire which had been allowed to smolder, and received from him a warm but respectful welcome, such as a man gives a loved superior.

It was a strange habitation, and still stranger men who lived there. A long, narrow hole in the solid rock hill, the entrance hidden from casual view by a pendent screen of vines. A contracted neck, through which a man could enter only in a stooping posture, but which made an abrupt curve to the left before spreading out into the chamber where the men lived, thus guarding perfectly against betrayal by intercepting all rays of the fire or torch light.

The two men were both beyond the middle stage of life, and Mexicans, as indeed their names indicated. Serapio was of medium height and build, Miguel was almost gigantic; but neither of them carried an ounce of superfluous flesh; each one might have stood as a model for a sculptor in search of varying but still perfect types of muscular manhood.

Neither was what could be called handsome in the face. The lines were graven too deeply, the expression too stern and even sanguinary. Both were men whom even a novice would have felt led no common life, whose earthly experience had been won in no ordinary school.

Their garments were rudely made, of tanned skins throughout, and bore many stains of varying darkness, but all seemingly made by the same agent. The broad belts about their waists were full of weapons, richly ornamented and of the finest quality, while many others hung against the walls—pistols and guns, bows and arrows, knives and lances. But there was one other object to be seen, more noticeable than all the rest, and which, if inspected, would explain all the rest.

Suspended from a cord, hanging in the smoke that rose from the fire, was a bundle of human scalps!

The mystery is a mystery no longer. Serapio and Miguel were professional scalp-hunters!

What had induced or driven them to adopt this terrible pursuit, no living mortal save themselves could tell, even Joaquin Murieta being kept in ignorance, though on every other point they were frank and open as day toward him. They two would set out together and penetrate to the very heart of the Indian country, rarely returning without a goodly share of trophies, which in time found their way to the governor's office, where they were paid for in good round terms.

Such were the men to whom Joaquin Murieta turned for aid in his hour of need, knowing that they would not fail him.

In silent, close attention they listened to the young Sonorian as he placed the situation fairly before them, their grave bearing closely resembling that of the human game which they so mercilessly hunted. Not until Joaquin ceased speaking did the faintest change come over their stern faces; then Serapio, who seemed to be the usual spokesman for both, said:

"Don Manuel Campido knows something which he refuses to tell you. He attempted your life and failed. In turn you took him captive. That makes his life yours, and life includes the tongue, brain, heart and all. If he refuses to speak what you desire to hear, you have the right to crush his obstinacy, and by the use of such means and tools as you deem best. Miguel and I are your tools. Do you put the questions, and we will see that they are answered."

"Too much talk," sententiously uttered the giant scalp-hunter, grasping Don Manuel Campido by the collar, raising him clear of the floor and giving him a short shake as though to clear the kinks out of both body and mind.

"Mercy, gentlemen!" gasped the wretched villain. "Spare my life and I will make you rich—I will pay any ransom!"

"Stop!" growled Miguel, with a more violent shake than before. "Wait until you are questioned, then speak."

The giant kicked his feet from under him and laid him down on his back, close beside the fire, then squatted beside him, looking expectantly toward the young Sonorian.

Joaquin laughed grimly as he noted the dark look of despair which settled over the bruised face of his enemy.

"For once, Don Manuel Campido, your boasted wealth can avail you nothing. Your

only hope lies in frankly answering the questions. I am about to put to you."

"If I confess all, may I go free, unharmed?"

"It is not in your place to impose conditions," was the stern response. "You are the slave now, and I the master."

"That means I am to be murdered by inches whether I tell all or not," cried Don Manuel, nerving himself with the desperation that so often answers the part of courage. "Do your worst, then! I will have my revenge in spite of all, for in killing me, know that you are signing the death-warrant of her you pretend to love—Carmela Felix!"

"The trail to death is a long and crooked one, where you have such guides as Miguel and myself, señor," laughed Serapio. "Will you please put the first question, Don Joaquin?"

"Don Manuel Camplido, you have spread or caused to be spread abroad the foul lie that I, at the head of a band of ruffians disguised as Apache Indians, waylaid the escort of Don Carrillo Felix, murdering the leader and abducting his daughter. Retract that calumny and confess the whole truth, or suffer the consequence of your obstinacy."

The prisoner turned a shade more livid, but his lips closed more firmly instead of opening, while the black scowl deepened upon his brows. The scalp-hunters glanced inquiringly at Joaquin, who gravely bowed his head.

"Serry to give you trouble, Don Manuel," grinned Serapio, "but our honor is pledged to bring you to full confession. In mercy to you we will proceed by easy degrees. Speak!"

As he spoke, the scalp-hunter wound a lock of hair which grew over the temple, around his forefinger and pulled steadily until it came away by the roots. Don Manuel turned white as a corpse with pain, but a snarling cry passed his lips. Swift as thought Miguel caught one of his mustaches between his thumb and finger, tearing it out by the roots with a single powerful twist. So suddenly was this done that the wretched man had no time to steel his nerves, and a horrible scream of agony broke from him.

"Bah!" sneered Serapio, "had I a child one year old that would not laugh with pleasure at such a trifling attention, I would drown it in the nearest buffalo-hole as a bastard!"

"Gag his jaws, or his bellowing may betray us to some prowler," coldly uttered the young Sonorian. "When he concludes to spare himself further pain and us trouble, he can nod his head as a token."

As in all else, the scalp-hunter promptly obeyed the speaker, and then resumed their torturing. It would be painful and disgusting to record all that was done. Enough that they were past masters of the art, and that ere long Don Manuel was forced to give the sign for which Joaquin was so keenly watching. Instantly the gag was removed from the wretched creature's jaws, and a leather flask of water held to his lips.

"Now speak," said Joaquin, sternly, "and beware how you attempt any evasion or deceit. And you, good friends, mark his words, for the time may come when I shall be forced to produce you to bear evidence to my innocence."

Don Manuel Camplido was utterly unmanned, and feebly gasped out a full confession, only reserving the fact that his bullet had laid Don Carrillo Felix low.

"So far good; but there is more to come," added Joaquin. "Tell me where the Senorita Carmela is held prisoner, how many men guard her, and what were your final instructions to them when you left."

Don Manuel hesitated, but only for a moment. Serapio made a significant gesture, and knowing that open speech alone could save him from still more diabolical torture, he answered the demand in full.

"For your own sake, quite as much as my own, I trust you have spoken the truth, Don Manuel Camplido. I mean to act promptly on your information, and should it prove false in any particular, you will be the greatest sufferer. I will leave you in charge of these gentlemen."

"Pardon, Don Joaquin," eagerly interrupted Serapio. "You surely forget! He spoke of some twenty rascals. Alone, they would massacre you—with Miguel and I, the odds would be nearer even. You could look after the lady, while we would amuse the rascals—eh, Miguel?"

"Good!" rumbled the giant. "His tongue is long and uneasy as a woman's, señor, but sometimes it goes straight to the mark, as now. We will bear you company."

"Nay, good friends, I ride alone in this," said Joaquin, advancing and cutting the thongs that confined the captain's hands. "You must watch over this villain—"

"We can truss him up, Indian fashion, and he cannot escape. No one, save we that are here, knows aught of this den. He might lie here alone for a thousand years—"

"There is too much at stake for me to run the risk of his escaping before he has been forced to clear me of guilt in the eyes of all honest men."

"If you are murdered by his wretched assassins, that will be but a poor consolation to your friends, señor," grumbled Serapio.

Joaquin uttered a low laugh as he responded:

"He shall give me a safeguard, never fear," tearing a blank leaf from a notebook and extending it, together with a lead pencil, to the prisoner. "Take these, Don Manuel Camplido, and write as I dictate. Refuse, or omit a single word, and I swear to you that what you have already undergone shall seem like heavenly bliss to the tortures which will be inflicted. Listen, and write:

"GASPARD: Treat the bearer of this, Don Joaquin Murieta, with all respect, and guard his life as you would my own. If aught of harm befalls him, my doom is sealed, for I am helpless in the hand of his faithful friends, who have solemnly sworn to put me to death after horrible tortures, in case Don Joaquin fails to return safe and sound within a reasonable length of time.

"Deliver into his hands the Senorita Carmela Felix, and suffer them both to depart at will, without let or hindrance.

"Remember, on your prompt obedience depends my life.

"Signed DON MANUEL CAMPLIDO."

Slowly, and with a degree of mental torture but little if any less than that he had suffered in the flesh, the miserable wretch wrote down the words dictated, then bowed his head upon his hands with a bitter groan. Truly, the wages of sin in his case were more bitter than death!

Closely Joaquin scrutinized the note, then carefully stowed it away in his bosom. There was an almost cheerful smile upon his face as he turned to the scalp-hunters:

"You see, my friends, I am not so foolhardy as you at first believed. Not but that I would feel doubly guarded, with you two as an escort, and under other circumstances, I would ask no better sport than to pit ourselves against that score of ruffians; but first of all the lady is to be considered. We would whip them, no doubt, but she might come to harm in the *melee*."

"We could wait until you had safely ridden away with the lady, then pitch into the *ladrones*," coaxingly suggested Serapio, but Joaquin shook his head decidedly.

"Let me once settle this affair, and then, if you still wish it, I will join you in a raid on those murderous devils. But now I must ask you to fall in with my humor. Bind that dog again, and guard him as a miser guards his treasure. Give him food and drink sufficient to keep him from starving, but not an ounce more. If I fail to return here within eight-and-forty hours, put him to death, and if you give him a slight token of what Satan, his master, holds in store for him, be sure my spirit will not mourn deeply."

"We will flay him alive, inch by inch, with red-hot knives that will scar his flesh so that there will be no danger of his bleeding to death," replied Serapio, with a matter-of-fact coolness that was more dreadful than the hottest anger.

"Good enough—I need say no more. Now give me some food and drink, and I will set out at once."

The young Sonorian ate and drank ravenously, then the rope ladder was cast down the face of the rock, and he descended in company with Serapio. The horse ridden by Don Manuel Camplido was found hard by, the saddle and bridle were quickly adjusted. Then, with one warm hand-clasp, Joaquin rode away to rescue his loved one.

CHAPTER XX.

AGAINST DESPERATE ODDS.

CARMELA FELIX seemed like one whose every hope had fled, whose spirit was utterly crushed, when Gaspard handed her over to the care of Diego, the young Mexican, with orders to bind her securely hand and foot. And it was not so much to be wondered at.

Tio Tomas had convinced her that escape from the power of Don Manuel's tools was as good as assured. She believed that the crisis of her perils was past, that in a few minutes more she would be riding at speed along the trail which would end in the rescue of Joaquin Murieta and their united bliss. But now—Tio Tomas a prisoner and surely death-doomed—herself in bondage, and liberty seemingly more distant than ever!

For one moment utter despair did fill her heart—soul-sick, she felt like giving up the unequal battle, and as Gaspard relaxed his cruel grasp, she would have fallen to the ground but for the quick support afforded by Diego.

The young man was one who had occasionally attended Don Manuel Camplido in the capacity of groom, and had been foolish enough to secretly entertain a romantic passion for the fair lady. On one occasion, when he had drunk more heartily than usual, Diego, unconsciously to himself, betrayed his secret to the keen-witted senorita. She was too high above him, and possessed too much sense, to take mortal offense at his presumption, and before the hour was past, she had entirely forgotten the discovery. But now, as Diego gently raised her form in his arms, Carmela could feel his lithe shape quiver with strong emotion, and like magic the memory of that afternoon returned to her.

At best this was a frail foundation for hope to build upon; but Carmela sprung from a fight-

ing race, which had many a time turned defeat into victory, and from that instant her resolve was taken.

Diego bore her back to where she had passed the hours until the wild outburst followed the disastrous venture of Tio Tomas, then gently lowered her to the ground.

"Pardon, lady," he muttered, in a tone of confusion, as he produced a stout rawhide thong. "You heard his orders. I must carry them out, or else suffer death in his rage."

Silently Carmela held out her hands, but there was a sad, reproachful light in her dark, lustrous eyes, that caused the young groom to flush painfully. Still he did not neglect his duty, and as Carmela felt the thong drawing tighter, a faint cry rose to her lips, and she quivered as though in pain. Diego trembled from head to foot, even more violently than she, and his unsteady fingers could scarcely loosen the knot they had formed.

"Thanks!" softly murmured Carmela, sinking down upon the ground and putting her ankles together. "The pain is not quite so severe now. I may be able to bear it."

Every word cut to the heart like a keen knife, and Diego made haste to complete his disagreeable duty, cursing Gaspard fiercely, if inaudibly, for having pitched upon him for such service.

"Never mind me," sobbed the maiden, in a voice that hardly rose above her breath. "Go do what you can for my poor old friend—save him, and my undying gratitude is yours."

"I would do much for your sake, lady, but what you ask is an impossibility. Tio Tomas has slain two members of the band—for Antone is dying—and the law appealed to is a sacred one. Were I to interfere, I would only beslain, without serving either you or him."

"I ask not for impossibilities; but you can delay the horrible crime—give my poor friend time to make his peace with Heaven—gain him what respite you can—go!"

Diego was only too glad to obey this last command. On that one point his heart was very tender, and he knew that, unless he was speedily beyond the personal magnetism of this rarely beautiful maiden, he would be undone. Should she beg him to set her at liberty, he felt that he could not refuse, and he felt not the slightest desire to fall a martyr in a cause where he could expect no reward.

Then too, the horrible fascination was upon him that was felt by his comrades—he was eager to witness, if not take an active part in, the expiation of blood. Therefore he gladly skurried away, nor was Carmela less pleased.

She had played her part most admirably on a moment's notice, aided by the curious infatuation of Diego. Any one in his usual senses would have seen that her cry of pain, however natural it sounded, was assumed for a purpose; would have noticed the manner in which she bowed her wrists apart where the rawhide thong crossed them, and known that when the muscles were relaxed she could readily slip out first one small hand, then the other, without the knots being untied. And scarcely had Diego turned his back before this was done.

Carmela saw that the attention of the outlaws was wholly occupied by the dying man and their prisoner, and tossing aside the rawhide thong, she drew from her hair the little silver dagger that answered the purpose of a fastening to her locks, and bending over, quickly cut the bonds that confined her feet.

Now she was at liberty. One quick leap would carry her into the clump of bushes which had served Tio Tomas so well, and with that friendly shelter interposed between herself and her enemies, Carmela could speedily steal away to a safe distance among the thick-lying bowlders. Once out of sight, there would be little danger of her recapture, provided she was at all prudent, and a human trail could only be followed through that region under the broad light of day, and even then by only the most skillful.

Reason told Carmela this, yet she hesitated to take the one step which divided her and comparative safety. Prudence dictated instant flight, lest the golden moment should vanish, never more to return; but the maiden recalled all that poor old Tio Tomas had dared for her sake, and the momentary temptation fled.

Yet how could she save him from the horrible fate which the dying outlaw was even then pronouncing? What could she do pitted alone against nearly a score well armed men with no weapon save a toy-dagger in her possession? Truly it was a wild and desperate idea, such as few women could have entertained even for a moment, and still fewer find the courage sufficient to attempt its accomplishment.

Her face was white and sternly fixed as Carmela keenly overlooked the ground and weighed the chances for and against the desperate project that was gradually shaping itself in her busy brain.

The outlaws were gathered around the spot where Antone half reclined, where Gaspard held Tio Tomas in his strong grasp, all listening eagerly to the words of their death-stricken comrade. Beyond them was the natural corral where the horses were staked out, while some little distance to the left grazed the

two animals which Tio Tomas had led away from the rest and equipped for the road. Closer, not far from midway between the crowd and her present position, lay the corpse of Perico, and Carmela's eyes began to glow with a steadier light as she saw the ruddy beams of fire-light reflected from the silver ornamented weapons that still remained in the dead man's belt.

"It can—it shall be done!" she mentally exclaimed, as she prostrated herself and began creeping toward the corpse. "They are fully occupied—they have eyes and ears for naught else—the very audacity of the plan is its best guarantee of success."

Unobserved Carmela reached the body of Perico, and slipped the keen knife and brace of pistols from his belt. These she secured in the silken sash that encircled her own waist, then, taking advantage of the scattered boulders and scrubby bushes with a skill and adroitness that would not have discredited a veteran scout, she stole toward the spot where the two horses grazed.

There was no time to lose. Carmela heard the fierce shout which greeted the demand of Antone, the command of Gaspard to produce the horse which was to bear the tongueless Mazeppa; she saw the hasty rush which followed to obey, and knew that on her alone depended the only hope for Tio Tomas.

Had the emergency been less critical, her courage might have failed her; as it was, nothing could be more admirable than the coolness and skill with which she set to work. With but little difficulty she secured the two horses, knotting the ends of their lariats together, then, crouching low down, leading them in a gradual manner toward the enemy.

The fiery young horse was brought up, and from its actions seemed to suspect something of the torture that was in store for it, biting, kicking and rearing in a manner that speedily cleared that side of the circle.

Carmela heard the malignant laughter of the dying man as he grasped Tio Tomas by the beard and flourishing the bloodstained knife before his eyes, and she knew that now or never must she act.

Springing into the saddle, she drew a revolver and urged the two horses forward. So sudden and unexpected was the onset, that she was fairly upon the outlaws before they could realize the truth, and as Gaspard turned his head with a fierce curse of mingled amazement and anger, a bullet crashed its way through his brain.

"You are surrounded—draw a weapon, and you die like dogs!" cried Carmela, her eyes glowing, the picture of a beautiful fury.

Another leap her horse made. Antone was knocked over backward, and one heavy hoof was planted upon his chest, crushing the feeble remnant of life out of his carcass forever.

"Quick! Into the saddle, Tio Tomas!" cried Carmela, threatening the bewildered ruffian with her pistol.

As Gaspard fell dead, he dragged the veteran gambusino down with him, but the love of life was still strong in the old man's heart, and wrestling himself free from the death-gripe, he climbed into the saddle with an agility lent by the emergency.

"Take this and fight your way out—shoot straight!" cried Carmela, thrusting a revolver into his hand, then cutting the lariats which bound the horses together with one swift stroke. "Wheel and follow—'tis for life!"

The outlaws were beginning to recover from the surprise and confusion into which they had been thrown by the sudden charge of the maiden and the death of their leader. They saw that she was alone—that no armed force responded to her call, and as Tio Tomas climbed into the saddle beside her, they realized the shameful truth—that they had been cowed and almost put to headlong flight by a single girl!

Yells of anger burst forth—there was a mad rush forward as the two horses wheeled above the dead men and thundered away along the winding trail that led to the open ground far away. Rapidly detonating revolvers sent a storm of lead after the fugitives, and at such short range, escape for those bold hearts seemed an utter impossibility.

Carmela saw Tio Tomas bend low along the neck of his steed, to lessen the size of the mark presented by his body, and she mechanically imitated his action, leaving her horse to pick its own way through the thick-lying obstacles.

All at once the animal she rode gave a spasmodic leap that almost unseated its fair rider. As by instinct Carmela divined the truth—that her horse was struck heavily if not mortally wounded—but before she could do aught to prevent the catastrophe, the stricken animal plunged headlong to the ground, hurling her violently from the saddle. A painful shock, then all was blank.

The new day was dawning when Carmela Felix recovered her consciousness, not all at once but gradually. At first she felt like one awakening from some horrible nightmare, not yet certain whether all was stern reality or only the baseless fabric of a troubled dream. Her head pained her. She attempted to raise her

hand to still its acute throbbing, but was unable to do so—they were bound together with stout thongs. And then, like a dread revelation, she realized the truth.

She remembered the daring attempt she had made to rescue Tio Tomas from mutilation and death. She could recall the stumble of her wounded horse and her fall. She knew that she must have been recaptured by the outlaws, else why these bonds? But Tio Tomas—had he succeeded in making his escape?

If so, Carmela knew that he would lose no time in seeking aid and returning to rescue her from these bloodthirsty rascals.

With a desperate effort, she raised herself to a sitting position and gazed eagerly around her.

Near the smoldering camp-fire stood the horses of the party, saddled, bridled and all in readiness for the road. Close by, in little knots, stood or sat the outlaws, their faces dark and ugly with frowns, while a little to the right—Merciful heavens! what was that?

A low, gasping cry burst from Carmela's lips as she bowed her head and closed her eyes to shut out the soul-sickening sight!

Bound to a rock, facing her position, was a human form. Its eyes were open, but that ghastly, stony stare spoke of death, not life. Dark lines across the ashen gray face told where blood had trickled and dried. No need to ask from whence it had flown, for the ruddy beams that heralded the rising sun, shone on a bare and fleshless skull, where the scalp had been barbarously torn off.

And in that one glance, Carmela recognized the corpse of her faithful old servant, Tio Tomas.

The cry which had been extorted from her lips by this fearful sight, attracted the attention of the outlaws, and Diego approached her, bearing a supply of food and drink.

"Take this food, lady," he said as he knelt before her and severed her bonds. "You will need all your strength, for there is a long and hard ride before us this morning."

Carmela raised her head as her bonds fell away, and snatching the weapon from Diego's hand, buried the long blade to its very hilt in his bosom. Then, with an almost maniacal laugh, she rose erect, sped across to the horses, leaped upon one and dashed away before a hand could be raised to stop her!

CHAPTER XXI.

FOR LIFE AND LIBERTY.

FOR a brief space the outlaws were thrown into utter confusion. The affrighted horses plunged here and there, and it was only by lively motions that some of the Mexicans escaped being trampled under foot. Added to this the desperately daring deed of the maiden who, but a minute before, they more than half-believed would never waken from that deathlike swoon, and a strong suspicion that Diego was playing them foul, and the momentary demoralization is not greatly to be wondered at.

The first thought was that Diego had set Carmela free, bidding her flee, and promising to cover her flight, for more than once since the departure of Don Manuel Campido had the young Mexican revealed the soft spot in his heart. Naturally they turned toward him as they drew their weapons, but a single glance revealed the truth. Diego lay upon his back, the red beams from the eastern sky reflected from the silver haft of the knife whose blade was invisible, whose guard rested directly over his heart.

"Thousand devils!" cried Sanchez the one-eyed, "the girl has murdered Diego, and is off! To horse! mount and follow—if we let her give us the slip now, I'd rather face the devil himself than tell Don Manuel!"

Active as cats the outlaws sprung to their horses, mounting in hot haste and thundering away after the fleeing maiden. Only a few moments had been lost, but Carmela had made the most of them. Already she was beyond pistol range, urging her horse on with voice and heel.

This desperate burst for liberty was made entirely without premeditation. The frightful discovery which Carmela made the moment she recovered consciousness, for the moment unsettled her brain, and it was more as a madwoman than a rational being that she caught up the young Mexican's knife and drove it so surely home to his heart. She felt a blind impulse to flee from the horrible object, and the ruffians near the horses were no more to her than so many stocks and stones.

But the swift motion through the cool morning air acted as a restorative, and the blood-red mist suddenly faded away from before her eyes.

The angry yell of Sanchez the one-eyed reached her ears, and glancing back over her shoulder, Carmela saw the outlaws mounting in hot haste and stretching out in chase.

The horse she had so blindly chosen seemed to be a good one, and as Carmela watched his movements for a few rods, her heart grew lighter and her hopes of ultimate escape increased. Her mount was both strong and active. She knew that there were few who were her superiors in the saddle for skill or courage; whether on level racing ground, or as now,

among thick-lying rocks, bristling cacti and stiff thorn-bushes, to successfully thread which might well puzzle the best of rough-riders.

Once more Carmela glanced over her shoulder as she heard the shouts of Sanchez the one-eyed ring out anew, and her eyes dilated with a look of terror, while her face grew white as that of a corpse, for she feared she had made a fatal mistake.

Instead of following directly in her tracks, the outlaws were veering to the right along another trail, as though in hopes of thus cutting her off. In no other way could she account for the yells of triumph which rung upon the morning air, yet still her more than womanly nerve did not fail her.

She cried encouragingly to her good horse, lashing him with the reins and plying her little heels with vigor. Louder yelled the ruffians, paler grew her countenance, as the trail she was following seemed to end abruptly against a high rock; but still she urged her horse on, preferring death by dashing against the *cul de sac* to falling again into the hands of those brutal assassins.

The fateful collision seemed inevitable, but still her good steed dashed on, and then, just as Carmela was about to close her eyes to shut out the death that she felt could not be avoided, the way seemed to open for them like magic.

In fact the narrow trail made an acute bend to the right just before the perpendicular rock was reached, and then ran on, apparently free and unobstructed.

Again Carmela took hope, but she knew that the chances of escape were indeed desperate. By its unlucky choice of trails where the division occurred, her horse was forced to cover nearly double the distance those were who kept to the direct trail. Not that there was any doubt but what she would reach the point where the severed trail united ahead of her pursuers, but a glance showed Carmela that she would lose nearly all the vantage ground gained by her at the start, and should the enemy attempt to cripple her mount, as they had once before, escape was hardly possible.

Her fair face stern-set, Carmela drew the silver dagger from her hair and pricked her horse sharply with the toy weapon. With a sharp snort, its pace quickened, the ground seemed to glide backward, and then the old trail was regained.

But Sanchez the one-eyed and his comrades had improved their advantage to the utmost, and now were less than two-score yards away. The cunning villains, who had assumed command on the death of Gaspard, knew the horse thoroughly, and knew that if managed skillfully, with Carmela's light weight upon it, there was little hope of its being overtaken in a fair chase by any other horse in the troop. He had hoped to confuse the maiden by his exultant yells when the trail divided, and to frighten her into turning aside where the thick-lying rocks and many chasms would speedily put an end to her flight, but when disappointed in this, he drew his pistol and bade his men try to cripple or kill her mount.

"Fire low, comrades!" he cried, plying his already bloody spurs viciously. "The devil will be to pay if she is killed—but better even that than suffer her to escape!"

Few persons can handle firearms with anything like certainty from the saddle, more especially while riding at full speed over a break-neck course, and thus a double peril threatened poor Carmela. An erring shot might cut short her thread of life, or if her horse should fall, broken limbs or instant death against the cruel rocks might be her portion. The chances were heavily against her, but not the slightest signs of flinching did she show. Swiftly the reins were lashed from side to side. Again the silver dagger was buried in the haunches of the snorting steed.

Spitefully the revolver of Sanchez the one-eyed rung out, and Carmela felt a faint tingle run up her bridle arm. Though she could not divine the cause then, the bullet had struck the taut bridle reins and almost cut them in twain.

Rapidly the pistols of the outlaws exploded, and Carmela's heart sunk low as she felt her gallant horse give a spasmodic spring, for instinct told her that at least one of the leaden missiles had found its mark. But the collapse she expected, did not come. Her horse wheeled into the straight trail, and bounded along with increased speed.

Loud and furious were the curses which broke from the brigands as the horse sped away, seemingly uninjured, and faster than ever were their pistols discharged. And to increase their mad chagrin, a silvery laugh floated back, mocking their fury.

"The devil is in that horse!" snarled Sanchez the one-eyed, exchanging his now empty pistol for its mate. "Ha! a bloody trail! All of our lead was not wasted! Sink your spurs deep, boys—it's only a question of time, now."

Here and there along the trail were distinctly visible large drops of blood upon the white stones, and the ruffians urged their animals with renewed eagerness.

"Ha! look—the devil of a horse gives in at last!" screamed the one-eyed ruffian, as the ani-

malridden by Carmela stumbled and almost pitched headlong.

Almost, but not quite; nor was it the weakness of coming death that caused the good horse to miss its footing. One hoof struck upon a round stone, which gave way beneath his weight, nearly producing a fall which would have been fatal to the hopes of its new mistress.

Carmela felt his footing yield, and drew hard on the reins to lend it that support given instinctively by a good rider. The strain was too great on the weakened leather, and the maiden lost her balance as both reins gave way. A less practiced rider would have been hurled to the ground, but by a desperate effort Carmela recovered her seat. Her face was pale as death as the severed reins fell to the ground, for now she knew that her wounded horse would be wholly beyond her control.

Sanchez cut his exultant speech short with a furious curse as he saw the fugitive's horse recover its footing and dash on with what seemed redoubled speed. Boiling over with rage, he resumed his firing, and once more a fierce yell of joy rent the air as he saw his flying target toss his head high, with a sharp snort of pain.

"Once more! Fill the infernal brute full of lead!"

A rattling volley was sent in response, and then arose a general cry of dismay. More than one heart seemed to stop its beating, and bronzed faces grew pale as the outlaws saw the maiden raise her hands convulsively to her head, then sink forward on her horse's neck, seemingly dead or dying!

Scarce had Sanchez time to note this terrible fact, when his own horse stumbled and fell. Castlike, he alighted upon his feet, but the unexpected shock sent him, with a rebound, end over end into a clump of thorn bushes. The two nearest horses stumbled over his fallen animal, and the remainder were jerked up barely in time to avert the same fate from their masters.

Sanchez, even before extricating himself from the thorns, noted the temporary check, and howled out in fury:

"On, curse ye! Take her, dead or alive!"

Unconscious of all this, poor Carmela drooped forward in the deep-seated saddle, the pallor of death upon her face, intensified by the rill of blood which trickled along her brow. She was not dead, but hers had been a fearfully narrow escape. A bullet grazed her temple, breaking the skin and giving her brain such a shock that her senses fled.

It was fortunate for her that she was Mexican born and bred. To more northern eyes, it looks strange and indelicate to see a lady riding astride, but Carmela followed the rule of her country, and to that she undoubtedly owed her reprieve from death. Sitting astride, the deep-seated saddle kept her from falling to the ground, which, at the mad pace her wounded horse was going, would have been almost certain death.

It seemed almost as if one-eyed Sanchez had spoken the truth, when he declared that the horse she rode was possessed of the foul fiend. Though scattering its life-blood at every stride, its speed increased rather than diminished. The rankling wounds acted as spurs, and like a demon horse, it rushed along the now winding trail, steadily gaining ground on its pursuers, though these were making free use of both rawhide and cold steel.

Carmela was dimly conscious of all this, though her person seemed paralyzed, and her will greatly weakened. She knew that she was in great danger of being hurled from the saddle at each one of the sharp curves in the trail, but she could not even try to raise her head. She was like one in a half-waking dream.

To her it seemed as though hours were consumed in that mad ride for life and liberty. Faintly the yells of her pursuers fell upon her ears, but she no longer felt dread of them. It was a strange condition of mind, one that words cannot describe.

On sped the gallant horse, without any perceptible flagging in either speed or strength. On thundered the outlaws in pursuit, though they were beginning to lose hope of ever overtaking this demon steed, which could lay a bloody trail for miles, and race all the faster at the end of it.

How long the mad race had lasted, Carmela never knew, but at length she was roused from her strange stupor by a human voice which repeated her name—a voice which she instantly recognized—and with a glad, sobbing cry she rose erect in the saddle, her blood-stained arms outstretched appealingly.

Again that shout—and then her eyes beheld him, her hero, her loved one! Riding straight toward her, leaping over bowlders and rifts, lunging down steep slopes which a sane man would have deemed impracticable, turning aside from the obstacle, though the horse he rode was nearly exhausted, and only kept upon his feet by the matchless skill of its rider—came the young Sonorian, Joaquin Marieta!

Carmela recognized him, called aloud his loved name—then a blood-red mist seemed to shut down between them. What pain and fear

were unable to wholly accomplish, great joy had wrought. Once more the maiden drooped forward in her saddle, now wholly lost to consciousness.

CHAPTER XXII.

JOAQUIN TO THE RESCUE.

It was indeed Joaquin Marieta whom Carmela Felix saw riding to her rescue, and how he came upon the scene so opportunely, may be briefly explained.

After leaving the curious home of the scalp-hunters, Joaquin rode hard and fast, pushing his steed to the utmost extent of its powers, hoping to reach the spot named by Don Manuel Camplido before the tools of the latter could leave it with their fair captive. But the region lying between was so broken and cut up that very rapid progress was out of the question. More than once the impatient lover, in attempting a short cut 'cross lots," found himself cut off by some barrier which not even his matchless skill could enable the jaded animal to overleap. The noble creature had covered many a weary league since last leaving its corral, and though its generous spirit promptly responded to each call upon its powers, the end of equine endurance must be reached at last.

The eastern horizon was growing rosy with the red rays of the rising sun as Joaquin reached a point of high ground and eagerly sought to recognize the spot where Don Manuel had left his men in charge of Carmela Felix.

Almost instantly his trained eyes caught the spot, far away to his right as he had suspected. Unluckily, he had taken a trail which, once entered upon, could not be left save at one end or the other, and long ere he reached the outcome, Joaquin felt sure he was losing precious time. And so it proved. Only for this last vexatious delay, he would have gained the rendezvous before Carmela roused up from her swoon and was driven to temporary insanity by the sight of poor Tio Tomas's mutilated corpse. As it was, Joaquin scarcely reached the high ground before the rapid firing of revolvers came faintly to his ears. One breathless moment—then his eagle vision read the startling truth.

"Mother of Mercy!" he gasped, rather than exclaimed. "'Tis Carmela—she is fleeing, and those hell-hounds are firing upon her—may the fires of heaven blast their eyesight and palsy their arms!"

Then began a mad race, such as few men in their sober senses ever undertook, and fewer still ever came to the end without broken bones. There was only one chance of success, and Joaquin made the most of it.

Straight ahead, paying no further attention to the winding trail, but forcing his mount to take the obstacles as they came, rode the young Sonorian in hopes of intercepting those in pursuit of his loved one. None but an utterly fearless man would have even thought of taking such a course; none but the king of rough-riders could have followed it for a hundred rods. Even Joaquin would have hesitated at some of the leaps had he been in his cooler senses, and even with a perfectly fresh horse between his thighs; but now he saw nothing but the form of his loved one in the distance—heard nothing save the rapid discharge of revolvers—realized only that should he fail her now, the fate of her whom he held far dearer than life, was sealed. Both man and animal seemed inspired by more than mortal powers. Rock and rift were taken in their stride. Rapidly the lines followed by the fugitive and the rescuer drew closer, and as his horse descended a steep slope, the rise beyond cutting off his view of the chase, Joaquin felt that he would succeed.

But his mount was rapidly failing. Only the superb riding of the young vaquero had kept it afoot this long, and the steep which was now to be breasted, threatened to prove the last feather, but Joaquin leaped from the saddle, thus easing the noble animal, and urged it up to the crest.

A wild cry burst from his lips as he leaped again into the saddle—a cry that reached the ears of Carmela and for a moment drove the benumbing stupor from her brain! Her drooping form was raised erect, her arms stretched out appealingly, and from her lips came a faint cry—the name of her hero, her lover!

The fiercest flames of Hades could not have checked Joaquin then. Nerving his failing steed with spur and rein, he dashed straight down the hill, more like a demon rider than knight of mortal blood. But swifter still sped the wounded horse along the open trail, and Joaquin saw that he would be unable to intercept the pain-crazed creature.

Four of the outlaws were riding in a clump, having forged far ahead of their fellows, thanks to the greater speed and bottom of their horses. They saw the astonishing revival of the maiden whom, until then, they had believed either dead or dying, and following the direction of her outstretched arms, for the first time they noted the mad rider.

Mechanically they drew rein, for there could be no doubt as to the intention of the new-comer on the scene, but as they saw that he was alone, and recognized him as the bitterly hated enemy

of their master, their indecision fled and with loud, fierce yells they spurred on to meet the audacious fellow before he could entirely recover control of his horse after that frightful descent.

Joaquin saw and read their actions aright, and once more that awful thirst for blood seized upon him. He knew that Carmela had recognized him, and ignorant of the real facts, he felt that she would soon come to a halt now that he stood between her and the enemy. He knew that he must kill these ruffians or be killed, and without a second thought of the long odds against him, he uttered a defiant shout and drew his revolver.

The trail was neared, but the gallant horse which had borne the Saddle King so far and nobly had shot its bolt. With an almost human groan, its strained muscles relaxed, black blood gushed from its mouth and nostrils as its great heart burst, but Joaquin drove his spurs home and supported the dying creature with the reins, slipping his feet from the stirrups and preparing for the fall. Only a dozen yards more of the steep slope and the level trail would be reached.

Down plunged the dying—the dead animal, for the last few strides were purely mechanical, and only the taut reins kept the poor beast in an upright attitude.

Then the level was struck, and the dead horse plunged heavily upon its head, shooting Joaquin from the saddle as though hurled by a catapult. He lit fairly upon his feet, but a fierce yell of exultation burst from the four outlaws as they saw him rebound and fall behind a clump of bushes.

Feeling confident that he was either dead or hopelessly crippled by that frightful fall, they rushed on, each one eager to be the first to strike the man they feared quite as much as they hated—only to see him rise up from behind the bushes, a leveled revolver in each hand!

It was not wholly through design that Joaquin so perfectly deceived his enemies. He alighted fairly enough, but the impetus with which he was hurled from the saddle forced him on and he stumbled behind the cover. For a moment he was stunned, but the exultant cries of the enemy aroused him, and like a ravening tiger he leaped up and confronted them.

Swiftly his revolvers exploded, and the two foremost men fell dead almost before they could realize their peril. The other couple wrenched in their animals, thus escaping the lead that whistled viciously past them. The two horses, as their masters fell, plunged forward in alarm, but Joaquin jumped out, and, grasping the nearest one by the mane, swung himself into the saddle.

This maneuver consumed hardly a moment, but it came near proving fatal to the Saddle King. The surviving outlaws, knowing that they must either kill or be killed, speedily regained their self-control and dashed straight at their foe, firing at every jump.

Joaquin felt a stinging pain in his left shoulder as he wrenched his new mount around, and knew that he was wounded, but how badly he neither knew nor cared. His bitter enemies were before him. The mad thirst for blood had taken complete possession of him, body and soul.

With a hoarse, snarling cry he hurled his horse upon them, thrusting the muzzle of his revolver into the face of the one on his right, shattering the skull of the doomed wretch to atoms, while his left hand fastened upon the throat of the second ruffian, tearing him from the saddle as with the gripe of a giant.

A pistol shot almost blinded the avenger, but the outlaw never fired another. With a strength lent by madness, Joaquin drew his enemy across the pommel of the saddle, dropping revolver and flashing forth his knife. One furious slash—then the body fell on one side, the head on the other!

In a moment, as it seemed, the tragedy was begun and ended. Four men against one—and now that one drew rein in the midst of four corpses!

Snorting with fear, the three horses wheeled and dashed away along the back trail, their appearance carrying consternation to the other outlaws, who had been too far in the rear to fully understand what was going on in front, though the wild clamor of fighting came clearly to their ears.

It was fortunate, perhaps, for Joaquin that such was the case for no merely mortal man could expect to win two such victories in succession, and live to tell the tale. Besides, he gave no thought to them. The fierce, intoxicating thirst for blood vanished, and in its stead came the memory of Carmela's appealing cry and gesture. Without a second glance at the victims of his insane fury, or a thought of the peril he was leaving on his trail, Joaquin shook the blood from his hands as he replaced his knife and wheeled his horse.

His gaze flashed swiftly ahead as he pled the spurs and urged his new mount along, but the expected vision did not reward him. Not far in advance the curiously walled-in trail made an abrupt curve, and beyond this his view was cut off. Besides, the struggle, brief though it seemed to him, had consumed more time than Joaquin realized, and unless halted in some

manner, the pain-maddened steed ridden by Carmela could have covered much space in that interval.

The truth of this began to dawn upon the young Sonorian as he dashed around the curve, only to find the course clear before him as far as the eye could mark its windings.

"She recognized me—she called me by name," he muttered, his face darkening with a Irish fear. "Surely she would not have ridden so far, unless—Ha! the horse was running away—was beyond her control!"

His keen eye fell upon the bloody drops that marked the course of the runaway steed, and he instantly divined the truth. A fierce imprecation grated between his clinched teeth as he plied his keen spurs mercilessly. None knew better than he what frightful peril threatened the maiden—how unmanageable becomes a wounded horse at times, or how often they plunge wildly to the death not only of themselves but of their riders as well.

A minute more carried him to where the sloping walls on each side of the trail spread out abruptly and grew more level. Here also the trail along which he had dashed divided and offered a choice of nearly a dozen diverging paths.

Mechanically he wrenched up his horse as his keen eyes anxiously scanned the rough but comparatively level ground beyond. To his rapidly growing horror, he could see nothing of his loved one. It was as though the earth had opened to swallow up the maddened horse and its fair rider. But a more natural fear assailed Joaquin.

"The brute has fallen and killed itself—perhaps slain *her*!" fell painfully from his livid lips as a horrible vision rose before his brain—of that fair and matchless form lying in a shapeless mass upon the cruel rocks, perhaps crushed out of all semblance to humanity by falling beneath the dying steed!

For a brief space Joaquin was wholly unmanned, reeling in the saddle like a drunken man, groaning aloud as he covered his eyes as though trying to shut out the horrible vision his overtaken brain had conjured up. But then his steel-like nerves regained their wonted elasticity. He flung out his hands and tossed back his head as though he could thus cast aside his torturing fears. His face was white as that of a corpse, but stern and hard-set as iron.

His self-control thus asserting itself, Joaquin proceeded to learn the truth with as much outward composure as the veriest stranger could have exhibited. Where there were so many trails, any one of which the runaway horse might have taken, there was nothing for it but to pick out the trail by the drops of blood. This was no difficult task, and Joaquin set his teeth more firmly as he noticed how rapidly the tell-tale drops thickened, for this served to confirm his worst fears.

Steadily he rode along the crimson spoor, casting frequent glances ahead of him in expectation of beholding the terrible sight that would crush his heart forever—and at length he beheld the carcass of a horse lying in a motionless heap at the foot of a huge rock, a hundred yards ahead.

One suffocating leap his heart gave, then seemed to suspend its functions. Joaquin turned deathly faint, but outwardly he was cold and composed as his horse bore him up to its dead mate.

A bloody mist was before his eyes, but he looked in vain for the mangled corpse of his loved one. Still he never dreamed that there was even the shadow of a hope left, feeling that his worst fears had come true—that Carmela had been caught beneath the fallen carcass and there crushed to death.

Joaquin dismounted, and stooping, grasped the dead horse by the heels. With what seemed a supernatural strength, he rolled the carcass over, then staggered back with a gasping cry—a cry not of soul sickening horror, but of amazement, for there were no signs of the maiden!

Again and again the young Sonorian rubbed his eyes as he stared stupidly around him, unable to solve the mystery—but then a glad hope sprung up in his breast, and he shouted aloud the name of his loved one, thinking that she had escaped uninjured when the horse fell dead; but only the mocking echoes from the surrounding rocky crags made answer, and almost as soon as born, the new hope died.

A single glance showed him that Carmela could not have fled from there. Surrounding the carcass was a patch of smooth, moist sand, but only his footprints marred it.

"She must have fallen or been thrown off along the trail."

Such was Joaquin's thought as he turned back along the bloody spoor, though he knew that had such occurred, he could hardly have overlooked the fact while coming.

Five minutes later he made a truly startling discovery. He saw that *three* horses had recently passed over that portion of the ground, and that the third animal, by an abrupt angle, had left the trail and headed for the rocky hills, a mile away.

"I saw only four—yet one of the cunning devils must have slipped by me, and overtaking

the horse, snatched poor Carmela from the saddle!" he muttered, as he turned aside upon the new trail. "God grant that she still lives! And may Satan have mercy upon her abductor when we meet!"

Rapidly Joaquin followed the trail, leading his horse, and when two-thirds of the distance to the hill was crossed, he uttered a wild cry of joy—for there, upon a rock, wreathed with vines, he beheld Carmela, gesticulating frantically. He could hear her voice, but failed to distinguish her words. He leaped into the saddle and dashed toward her at breakneck speed. He saw her suddenly sink down as though in a swoon—and then!

He saw the coils of a lasso settle about his horse's neck, and before he could do aught, he was hurled from the saddle!

CHAPTER XXIII.

"FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE."

IN the mean time, what had befallen Carmela Felix?

She had swooned away on recognizing Joaquin Murieta, her overtaken nerves being unable to bear the almost ecstatic joy following so closely upon the heels of utter despair. She had believed him helpless in the power of that fiend incarnate, Don Manuel Camplido, subject to his infernal malice, and the sight of him here, alive and at liberty, generously speeding to her rescue—the shock was too great for her weakened powers to bear, and once more her senses reeled, once more her nerveless form drooped forward, only kept from being hurled to the ground by the high pommel and the instinctive grasp of her fingers on the heavy mane of the madly flying horse.

On and still on the maiden was borne in that wild race that was to end in death—it might have been for hours of time and leagues of space for aught she could tell. But then, as once before, her brain began to recover before her weakened frame showed any signs of rallying.

Faint and indistinct, her brain recorded the rapid thud—thud of a horse's hoofs—not her own, for the strokes announced a shorter and more rapid stride. Like a flash returned the vision she had beheld for a moment. She believed that Joaquin Murieta was riding to overtake and rescue her. She sought to raise her head—to utter his name in a glad, encouraging cry—but her faithless body would not obey her active brain.

Truly, a strange experience, but one not without its parallel. Her brain could work, but her body was benumbed by a trance.

Nearer and nearer came the echoing hoof-strokes, and so little doubt did Carmela feel that it was Joaquin speeding to her rescue, that she wondered and even felt a little hurt in her mind that he uttered no sound, called not her name aloud in encouragement. She knew that only a few feet separated them. She could feel the hot breath of the horse puffing past her bared arm, and with all the power of her brain she sought to throw off that horrible numbness, so that she might arise and greet her noble lover as he deserved.

Then—a strong arm stole around her, and she felt the steel-like muscles strain as she was lifted clear of the saddle. She was drawn against a broad breast, and then the strange spell which bound her was shattered.

"Joaquin—my hero—my god! Thanks to the blessed Virgin, we are once more united!" burst from her lips in an ecstasy of joy, and the long-pent up tears rained from her eyes.

But it was only for an instant that she nestled against the broad bosom of her rescuer. Some subtle instinct warned her of the terrible mistake—and a faint, gasping cry of horror came to her lips as she raised her eyes to—not the face of Joaquin Murieta, but to a forbidding visage, heavily bearded, from which two bleared and blood-shot eyes looked gloatingly down upon her!

"Quiet, girl—would you commit suicide?" came a deep, harsh tone, and the muscular arm tightened around the distracted maiden as she struggled frantically to free herself. "A fall on those rocks at the pace we are riding, would shatter every bone in your dainty body!"

Almost fiercely he held her, and Carmela felt her senses reeling as a band of steel seemed to crush in her ribs. And then once more came a merciful blank.

"The devil be thanked for that, anyhow!" growled the abductor, cautiously relaxing his pressure until assured that Carmela had indeed swooned away. "I dare say I am a bloody fool for taking so much trouble—Ha!"

For the first time he obtained a fair view of the face of the maiden, and despite its pallor, despite the deep-drawn lines of care and pain, despite the blood marks which stained her countenance, an exclamation of recognition broke from him, followed by an oath of delight.

"Ye gods!" he cried, a satanic exultation written upon his truly villainous countenance. "Surely my patron saint put it into my head to play them all this little trick! Who would have dreamed of finding *her* here, and in such an extremity? How did it happen? Who were those fellows in chase? Not friends, since they were firing upon her! And the other? A true

dare devil, to take a ride like that! But what matters who or what, Black Lopez—hold ye your gripe on the prize, for there's both revenge and still sweeter gold in the air!"

A wild laugh concluded this muttered soliloquy, and then Black Lopez, as he entitled himself, plied his spurs vigorously, sending the magnificent animal which he bestrode, along the winding trail almost with the speed of wind.

If the truth was written upon his features, then indeed had poor Carmela fallen from the frying-pan into the fire, for his look was that of a satyr as his blood shot eyes rested upon her pallid features.

Swiftly Black Lopez urged his horse on, only slackening his pace as he neared the rocky eminence, raising one hand with a quick gesture. As by magic nearly a score of men leaped out from the thick cover which lined both sides of the trail, all armed to the teeth, all looking inquiringly at the rider, as though awaiting orders.

"Back to cover!" cried Black Lopez. "Guard the trail, and if any one follows, take them alive, if possible, but *take* them dead or alive. Not one must escape you!"

Like magic the armed men vanished. Black Lopez loosened the reins and sent his spurs home. Like a flash the cream-colored horse darted ahead, following a sharp curve in the trail that led around a shoulder in the rocky height. Once more came that sinister laugh, for now the evil-browed rascal felt assured that his hastily formed scheme would prove successful.

Alighting from his horse, he left it to feed at will, and carrying the senseless maiden with apparent ease, he nimbly ascended a steep path which appeared to have been frequently traveled by either human or animal feet.

In a few minutes he reached the spot for which he had been aiming, and lowering his limp and lifeless burden to the ground, he leaped upon a vine-wreathed rock and gazed eagerly down upon the comparatively level ground.

He took in the scene at a single comprehensive glance.

Far away he beheld three riderless horses dashing madly along the back trail as though frantic with fear. Beyond these he noted a number of horsemen who were budding together as if thrown into confusion by the fearfully sudden fate which had overtaken their better mounted fellows.

Only for a moment did he devote to these—then an oath of strangely mingled surprise, anger and admiration hissed through his tangled beard as his gaze rested upon a single horseman who was dashing swiftly along the trail, bending over in the saddle, but casting many quick glances ahead.

"That dare-devil, break-neck rider! A different horse, but the same man. Ye gods! who and what is he? Not one man in a thousand would have dared taken that ride—not one in ten thousand could have escaped a broken neck—but this fellow not only accomplished the feat, but he must have whipped those four men—killed them all, by the Eternal!" he exclaimed, as his keen eye roved back and rested for a moment upon the scene of the combat, without much difficulty distinguishing the bodies of the four outlaws.

Reckless dare-devil though he himself was, a sober frown settled upon the face of Black Lopez, for he had seen enough of the chase before taking a part in it to feel assured that the mad rider was seeking to rescue Carmela from her enemies, and he now saw enough to convince him that the enmity of such a man was to be dreaded. But only for a brief space; then an angry light crept into his bleared eyes, and his stained teeth showed themselves wolfishly.

"With that man as a partner, I could sweep the whole country, but he mustn't interfere now. I'd hate to see him die, but if he picks out the puzzle I have laid for him, his doom is sealed! Revenge and gold both—I can't give them up to satisfy an idle fancy for a brave man."

A low cry from Carmela caused Black Lopez to leap down from the rock and listen to her side. She had recovered her senses, and the ruffian laughed harshly as she shrunk away, putting her hands to her eyes as though to shut out some disagreeable vision.

"You recognize me, then, Senorita Carmela Felix?" he sneered, his red eyes glowing, his harsh features rendered even more than usually forbidding by the forced grin which distorted them. "You have not forgotten Black Lopez, the faithful servant of your honored father? You still remember that day, when the lashes fell thick and heavy—when the knife of the butcher was brought into play—when the hounds were held ready to be turred loose on the trail of a man, instead of a wolf! If you have forgotten, I still remember! Nor have I yet forgotten the oath which I recorded, on my bended knees, that night, after I had thrown the blood-hunters off my track. Not a day since then, though years have passed, have I forgotten to repeat that vow of bitter vengeance. Every thing worked against me, and each month seemed to put the fulfillment of my oath still further from me, but I never despaired. I knew that the day would come, soon or later

—and now it has! Carmela Felix, *you* were the cause of my being treated thus, and *you* shall pay the first installment of the black debt!"

With indescribable fury these sentences were uttered, and the ruffian ceased only when the lack of breath forced him.

It was a dark and forbidding leaf of the past which was thus recalled, and one that could hardly have happened in any other country than Mexico, at least on this continent.

Black Lopez, three years before, was accounted one of, if not the very best vaquero on the Felix estate. His one great fault was an inordinate love of strong drink, which grew stronger as he grew older. One day, while intoxicated, Carmela, then but a child, chanced to encounter him some little distance from the house. Really meaning no harm, Lopez caught her up in his arms and repeatedly kissed her. She was frightened and screaming, struggled so desperately that she slipped from his uncertain grasp and fell to the ground. She received some bruises, but fear prevented her from feeling them, and still shrieking for help, she fled for the rancho. Black Lopez was partially sobered by the accident, and in his desire to reassure the child, he hastened after her, shouting for her to stop, just as Don Felix and a number of his friends rushed forth from the building, alarmed by the shrieks.

At first glance the case looked black enough for Lopez, and he was at once seized. In vain he tried to explain. He was judged before a word was spoken, and the wine-excited rancheros lost little time in executing the barbarous sentence. The lash was applied until the drunkard's back dripped blood. The knife of the butcher shaved off both ears, and then horses and hounds were brought to hunt the wretched criminal to death. But, maddened by pain and a sense of his horrible doom, Black Lopez tore the knife from the executioner's hand, buried it to the hilt in the heart of the nearest ranchero, leaped into the saddle of the dead man's horse, and rode away at top speed, knowing that capture meant death.

It so chanced that the horse he appropriated was the fastest one of the lot, and finally Black Lopez succeeded in making his escape. And until this day, Carmela had never since heard of the man who had suffered so terribly through her fear.

Stunned, her very brain benumbed by what she had undergone during the past two days, Carmela could only shrink away from that hideous face. Black Lopez saw the motion, and a hard laugh was his only comment. He saw that she was comparatively helpless, and again leaped upon the rock, peering through the vines that depended from a scrubby bush, eager to learn what the dare-devil rider was doing.

He saw Joaquin Murieta dragging aside the body of the horse ridden by Carmela, then saw him hastily scanning the ground around the carcass.

"He is no fool—so much the worse for him!" muttered the outlaw, his bleared eyes glowing. "Ha! he suspects the truth—he is taking the back trail—now for it!"

Breathlessly he watched, and a curse grated betwixt his teeth as he saw the rough-rider strike the trail that led to the hill.

"I'd rather have him for a friend than a foe! He may smell mischief—curse the dogs! why don't they lie closer?" he growled, for the moment forgetting that his elevated position enabled him to see much more of the ambush than was possible from the same level with it. "She must know who he is—Ha!" as a sudden thought struck him. "He was after her—he risked his neck a dozen times over in his haste to rescue her from those four—he must love her intensely. One glimpse of her now would make him blind to all else—ha! ha! she shall be my decoy duck, to lure her lover to death!"

It was a diabolically cunning scheme, and laughing maliciously, Black Lopez leaped down from the rock to put it into execution. Grasping Carmela, he lifted her to the top of the rock, then followed after. Holding her so that he himself was invisible to any one below, he pointed out the young Sonorian and demanded if she knew him.

The eyes of true love are very keen, and a wild cry burst from Carmela's lips as she recognized her lover. Her arms were outstretched toward him. She forgot all else—forgot that danger must surely lurk in his path.

Black Lopez laughed malignantly as he saw Joaquin look in that direction, for he knew that his cunning scheme was a success. He saw that the maiden was recognized—saw Joaquin leap upon his horse and dash furiously toward the hill. No fear of his suspecting an ambush now. He had eyes, thoughts only for his loved one, whose outstretched arms called to him even louder than her voice.

"See!" and his voice sounded more like that of a devil than aught human. "Your lover is riding straight into the snare, and *you* are the lure! Look again. Do you see my men yonder in ambush on both sides of the trail he must follow? I stationed them there, and bade them care for all who came, to take them, dead or alive. If he is slain, *you* are the cause of

his death. If captured alive, then he shall suffer all the tortures your accursed father inflicted upon me—you shall stand by and witness his bitter agonies, and *that* will be my first blow for revenge. After—bahl!" and he laughed malignantly as the poor girl, realizing now the fearful mistake she had committed as she saw the armed men in ambush awaiting the coming of her lover, frantically motioned Joaquin to turn and flee, crying out a warning that was rendered inarticulate by her deep anxiety. "As well try to choke off the famished jaguar when it has tasted blood, as to think of checking him, now that he has caught sight of you! It is almost a pity—for he is a brave fellow—but *you* love him, and through him I can punish you most deeply."

Again Carmela shrieked forth a warning, and fearing lest her words should be understood, now that the mad rider was drawing near, Black Lopez forcibly dragged her down behind the leafy screen, holding her prostrate with one hand while he eagerly peered down upon the level. And then, as Joaquin was hurled headlong from his horse, he laughed like a demon!

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MAN OF BUSINESS.

No sooner did Black Lopez witness the downfall of the dare-devil rough-rider than he rose erect on the vine-wreathed rock and uttered a clear, far-reaching whistle. It attracted the attention of his fellows, and he bade them, by motions, bring their prisoner up the hill.

Satisfied that he was understood, the outlaw descended from his perch, and raising Carmela in his powerful arms, bore her rapidly away. Only for a comparatively short distance, however, for a level sort of plateau was reached, surrounded by a wall of stone and thorny bushes. Here and there were scattered rude huts of brush and grass wattled together.

Beside one of these little huts Black Lopez paused and lowered the maiden to the ground. With the contents of a leather liquor-bottle, he began bathing her face, as though eager to restore her consciousness, but ceased as several of his men entered upon the scene, bearing the soiled and blood-stained form of the young Sonorian between them. He motioned them to lower the nerveless body, then bent over it and curiously scanned each feature, as though seeking to recognize some one whom he had known in the past.

"The face is a strange one to me," he muttered, then adding, as he turned to his fellows: "Have none of you met him before? Can you tell his name, or what he is?"

Simultaneously the men shook their heads. They could give their chief no information concerning the rough rider.

"After all, it don't matter much. He is dear to *her*, and I have sworn vengeance—Ha! you here yet?" he exclaimed, in a louder tone, as he noted the curious glances with which his men were regarding the insensible maiden.

"Awaiting your further orders, captain," respectfully replied one of the men, a tall, fine-looking fellow.

"Return to where you captured this fellow. There are more riders beyond, and they may incline to make us trouble. Send out one or two scouts to learn who and what they are. Tell Cagatinta to on no account allow any one to reach the hill, but not to open fire until he is sure they are our enemies. Go—lively!"

Black Lopez was clearly a bit of a martinet after his own fashion, for the men obeyed without a word or the slightest hesitation, hastening back the way they had come.

Scarcely had they disappeared when the young Sonorian began to show signs of returning consciousness, and Black Lopez quickly removed the weapons from the person of his captive, then dexterously bound his hands and feet. Rapidly as this was performed, there was scant time to spare, for Joaquin made a desperate effort to arise, all his powers of both mind and body seeming to return instantaneously.

"Do not be impatient, my dear sir," uttered Black Lopez, with a mocking laugh. "You have already taken too much severe exercise for the good of your health, and as your physician, I have taken measures to insure your quiet obedience."

Joaquin glared at him fiercely, but then Carmela uttered a low, gasping cry, throwing herself beside her lover and tearing frantically at his bonds. Swiftly the outlaw's muscular arm shot around her waist and drew her forcibly away, while he laughed in grim derision alike at her futile struggles and the desperate efforts which Joaquin made to burst his bonds.

"Release that lady, scoundrel, or I'll tear you limb from limb!" snarled the young Sonorian.

"Will you not grant me time to say my prayers before you annihilate me, Senor Don Furioso?" grinned the outlaw. "Bahl! silly boy—the powers of life or death lie in *my* hands, not yours. From the moment of your first crossing my path, you were doomed!"

"Spare him—have mercy on him, and do what you will with me!" gasped Carmela, scarce realizing what she said, but Joaquin turned pale as death as he saw what a satanic expression

crept over the brutal countenance of the outlaw.

"No more, Carmela—plead not with that demon. Let him work his will upon me—but may the fiercest flames of hell blast him forever if he dares to harm one hair of your head!"

Black Lopez laughed mockingly. He could afford to bear hard words while the game was so wholly in his own hands, when the vengeance over which he had so long dreamed was almost as good as accomplished.

"You two are lovers, if I mistake not," he said, his harsh voice softening, but with a malignant fire in his eyes that gave the lie to his tones. "You, I know, are the Senorita Carmela, daughter of Don Carrillo Felix; but he—what and who is he?"

"A man, as I will force you to admit, if you dare cut these bonds and set me at liberty. You may keep your weapons—I ask only the use of my bare hands—"

"Your death will come soon enough, foolish boy, never fear," laughed Black Lopez, but as he was really a bold, reckless man himself, he could appreciate the same qualities in another, and there was something of admiration in the look with which he regarded the young Sonorian.

At this moment one of his men hurriedly approached.

"Senor Capitan, an armed force has made its appearance, and their leader has advanced with a flag of truce, requesting the honor of a personal interview with you."

"Who and what is he?" sharply demanded Black Lopez.

"An old acquaintance of yours, capitan, and if I mistake not, one who dabbles a little in our own line. He gave his name as Sanchez, the one-eyed—"

"Ha! old Sanchez—and he demands an interview with me. Well, escort him hither—but blindfold him first."

As the messenger departed, Black Lopez removed the long crape scarf from about his waist and with it bound Carmela's arms to her side, paying no attention to the violent threats which Joaquin showered upon his head, then turned away toward the entrance to the little plateau.

He was not kept long in waiting. One-eyed Sanchez, looking something the worse for his headlong plunge from the saddle into the thorn-bush, was led in blindfolded. Black Lopez made a signal, and the bandage was removed from the one serpent-like eye of the ruffian.

"Sol!" exclaimed the outlaw, "the devil has not yet claimed his own!"

"As you say—and I am overjoyed to once more meet my old friend in the flesh," retorted Sanchez, with a low bow.

Black Lopez laughed, nowise offended by the cool manner in which the adroit old rascal turned the left-handed compliment.

"No doubt he has a lien upon us both; but this is not business. You did not come here only to pass compliments?"

"No, but to claim runaway property," and the keen eye wandered toward Carmela, who was now kneeling beside Joaquin.

"You mean the girl?" and the face of Black Lopez darkened.

"Yes; she killed one of my men and made her escape this morning. We followed in hot haste—"

"But failed to overtake her, and I took her captive. Finders keepers is a wise old maxim, Sanchez."

"When it can be followed without losing one's own life, Lopez—not unless," was the pointed retort, but the outlaw only laughed harshly as he added:

"Your force is hardly large enough to justify threats, old comrade. You are within reach of my arm, and a single word from me would convert your gang down yonder into wolf and buzzard bait."

"All that may be true," coolly replied Sanchez, "but there are more where I came from, and once let Don Manuel Camplido strike your trail, our death would not long go unavenged. Come, we are both men of the world. Let me tell you just how the case stands, and then you can answer."

In as few words as possible, the one-eyed rascal gave a clear synopsis of the rather complicated case, though of course he was still in ignorance of what had befallen Don Manuel Camplido, nor could he explain how Joaquin Murieta happened to come upon the scene.

"Now you have a bird's-eye view of the whole case," he added, speaking with an assumption of confidence which he was really far from feeling, knowing Black Lopez so well. "You must see that our claim is the best—"

"You lost them—I found them," doggedly uttered the outlaw. "Only for me, you would never have laid eyes on them again, unless when they came to witness your death by the garrote!"

"What do you intend doing, then?"

"First, to send word to Don Carrillo Felix—"

"I'd hate to be your messenger," grinned Sanchez. "I tell you that the old man is dead and scalped!"

"Then to Don Luis, or whoever may have

charge of the estate. I will offer the girl for ransom. If they refuse, or make any delay, I will restore her to them—piecemeal!"

"Listen, old friend. I know what bitter cause you have for hating the Felix family, but a man is a rank fool to cut off his own nose to spite his face."

"What do you mean?" sharply demanded the other.

"Just this. You have a glorious chance now to gain both revenge and gold. You might gain the last by surrendering the girl to her friends, but unless she was delivered up unharmed in the slightest particular, you would be foiled. Now why not ask the same reward from my master? He would pay it—after I explained the impossibility of rescuing her in any other way. You would have the ransom money and the sweetest of revenge besides on the girl who was the means of your being treated so barbarously, three years ago, for she hates Don Manuel so intensely that I verily believe she would take a poison-blind rattlesnake to her bosom in preference!"

Black Lopez gazed keenly into the face of his brother rascal, but Sanchez was bold in the novel confidence of speaking the truth, and his single eye never flinched.

"If you are lying to me!" began Lopez, threateningly, but Sanchez interrupted him with a sinister laugh, at the same time pointing to where Carmela knelt beside Joaquin.

"Don Manuel Camplido is her betrothed husband, and he means to marry her—but look yonder! A blind man could see that those two are lovers—that her heart is bound up in him. Satan himself could not devise a more exquisite torture for her than to make her Don Manuel's wife."

Black Lopez was convinced at last, but he suffered no signs of this to appear upon his countenance, and his voice was harsh as ever when he spoke:

"Business is business, and these three years of wandering from pillar to post have taught me to value good gold even above revenge. I will put the girl up at auction, and the highest bidder may take her. Say no more, for my mind is made up."

"Concerning her, all right; now for the man."

"He shall never trouble Don Manuel, never fear," and Black Lopez laughed malignantly. "He is a bold dare-devil, such as does my heart good to meet, but she loves him, and that is enough to damn him ten times over. While waiting for the bids to come in, I will amuse the dainty lady by putting her lover through a course of sprouts—"

"And, by so doing, drive her mad, or kill her outright! True, you would have a taste of revenge, but where would your gold be? Don Manuel would hardly pay much for her then. Instead, he would raise the whole country in arms against you. You would be hunted to death like a mad-dog!"

He paused for a moment in order to let his words have their full effect, then resumed:

"Come, old friend, listen to reason. In Don Manuel's name I promise you a reasonable ransom for the man, too. It will increase his triumph and add doubly to the torture she will feel to have the marriage ceremony performed before his eyes. You can realize that?"

Once more Black Lopez was convinced by the Satanic ingenuity of the keener-witted villain, and reluctantly admitted as much.

"Good! I pledge you my honor that you shall receive fifty onzas for the fellow. I will take him back with me as a token to Don Manuel that you mean to deal squarely with him, and that the story I tell is a true one. Don Manuel will return with me to settle the other matter. We will find you here?"

"If you two come alone, yes. But beware! If any treachery is attempted, I will know who to strike first!"

"She is your safeguard. Keep her securely hidden in some other spot until you finger the gold," laughed Sanchez.

His men were signaled by Black Lopez, and Carmela torn shrieking from the side of her lover. Joaquin was borne down the hill, bound securely upon a horse, then Sanchez gave the word to ride for the Camplido rancho.

CHAPTER XXV.

TRAILING A FRIEND.

THOUGH silenced, the two scalp-hunters were not convinced by the reasoning of Joaquin Murieta, and they saw him depart upon his perilous mission with many forebodings. Their fatigue was forgotten, and lighting their pipes, they squatted down by the fire, opposite each other. As was natural, Serapio did the most of the talking.

"We did wrong in listening to him, Miguel, or if we listened, then we should not have obeyed. Don Joaquin is young and headstrong. He is the soul of honor, brave and generous as the Cid Campeador—but he does not always know what is best for himself, eh, Miguel?"

The giant grunted, whether in assent or disapproval none save himself and Serapio could have told, but there was an anxious light in his great dark eyes as they rested upon the face of his talkative comrade.

"Don Joaquin is in love, too, Miguel. That will not render his brain clearer or his eyesight keener. A man in love is only half a man, at best, but worst of all when he is on the trail of his lady-bird. He is blind, then, to the signs that would have spoken to him in his sober senses louder than thunder. You know how cunning and wary an old buck is, Miguel—but you know, too, that when he is 'running' that same wary old buck would not leave the scent though a dozen hunters stood on the trail."

"Well?" uttered the giant, his brows contracting and a look in his eyes as though he thought the garrulous Serapio was losing time in beating about the bush.

"I'm fearing it is bad, not well," added Serapio, the puffs of blue smoke coming faster than ever. "Don Joaquin is something like that old buck. He is on the love-trail, and signs that he would have read easily enough at any other time, he overlooked now. See, brother Miguel! is not that the face of a snake?" he cried in a tone of intense earnestness, bending forward and pointing one finger at Don Manuel Camplido, who had been eagerly listening to their words.

The wretched prisoner closed his eyes, unable to withstand the fiery glitter of one pair of eyes, the lurid glow of the other.

"He lied to us—his tongue is double forked! He thought we all three would go to redeem the lady, and he made a false confession, hoping still to baffle us all by slipping away while we were absent. He has sent Don Joaquin to meet his death in a trap—"

"No, no, I spoke the truth, gentlemen!" cried Don Manuel, but Serapio continued without noticing the interruption:

"We cannot stay here, Miguel, idly sucking our thumbs while Don Joaquin, our friend and benefactor, is risking his life through the treachery of this man-snake. If our fears should prove mistaken, he may reproach us for leaving this man-devil alone unguarded—"

The giant arose and with one stride stood over the helpless prisoner. One hand grasped a long knife, and the red glow in his eyes as he stooped and felt for the heart of Don Manuel with the other, could not be mistaken.

Serapio laughed softly, but a word from him caused the giant to pause.

"No, Miguel, not that. A touch of the knife would indeed insure us against his escape, but Don Joaquin would then have solid cause for complaint. Besides, where would be our excuse then, for following his trail? Be quiet, fall back and listen. I must have your evidence, too!"

Without a word the big scalp-hunter replaced his knife and stood aside. In the hands of Serapio, he was like a little child, until the moment of action came; then he was a human tornado, that naught mortal seemed able to withstand.

"Don Manuel Camplido," slowly uttered Serapio as he knelt beside the captive, holding the keen point of a knife against his throat. "Confess that your words were false—that you lied to Don Joaquin Murieta—"

"I spoke the truth, so help me—"

The knife-point lowered until it pierced the skin and cut short the trembling protestation.

"Think again, my dear sir," and Serapio grinned down into the fear and pain distorted face of the ranchero, with a diabolical cunning glittering in his eyes. "Your confession was a lie—you sent Don Joaquin to meet his death in a hidden snare—stop! Your brain is confused, and you do not fairly understand me. Unless you confess, freely and frankly, I will measure the thickness of your neck with this bit of steel. Remember: one false word, and you die!"

"Now answer: your pretended confession to Don Joaquin was a false one. The lady he seeks is not at the spot you described. Instead, there is an ambush planted there for the purpose of killing him. Speak—am I not right?"

At length Don Manuel began to understand what was expected of him, and he faltered out an assent. With a short, mocking laugh Serapio rose erect, his eyes blazing with triumph as he turned to his fellow scalp-hunter.

"You hear, Miguel? Don Manuel Camplido, of his own free will and accord, without force or intimidation, acknowledges that he imposed upon Don Joaquin with a false confession, that he has sent him to his death, unless we can save him from falling into the snare, by following and warning him."

The giant nodded, his face grave as that of a judge, but there was a humorous twinkle in his big eyes that told how thoroughly he appreciated the cunning ruse of his comrade. Now they were thoroughly armed against the displeasure of Joaquin Murieta. He could not blame them for their disobedience when they could swear that Don Manuel admitted his confession was only the plausible cover to a deadly snare!

Thus far, Serapio had acted with an almost annoying deliberation, but now he sprang to work as lively as a cricket.

"Buckle down to it, Miguel, my son!" he cried, forming a gag which he dexterously applied to the prisoner. "We're going to follow Don Joaquin, but we must make sure of this

two-legged snake first. Open the treasure cache—it will hold our game, I guess, with some squeezing!"

The giant strode to the rear of the cave, and brushing aside some sand and gravel, inserted his fingers in an irregular crack, then raised up a long, flat stone slab, revealing a coffin-like cavity, half full of powder kegs, canvas-bags and other articles. All but the money-bags were removed, they being crowded down into the lower corners. Then Serapio steadied the slab while his herculean comrade picked Don Manuel Camplido up and crowded him feet foremost into the singular cache.

It proved to be a snug fit, and the miserable wretch must have felt as though in his coffin, especially when the heavy slab was lowered over him. He expected no less than death by suffocation, but such was not the purpose of the scalp-hunters. They knew that the irregular crack at the head of the prisoner would furnish him air sufficient, and that he would live through the ordeal, unless they themselves were killed while seeking to serve their friend.

"And if we are, Don Joaquin will still be avenged," chuckled Serapio. "Unless we open it, that cache will remain sealed until the day of doom!"

"No loss, either! Come—the trail will grow cold."

Well supplied with weapons and ammunition, the two scalp-hunters left the cave, descending by means of the shrubs and vines, lest the skin ladder, if left dangling in the wind, should betray the secret of the den to some prowling human.

The giant turned toward the spot where their horses were kept hidden, when Serapio checked him.

"We can make the trip quicker afoot than mounted. Besides, we are only to show ourselves in case Don Joaquin runs into danger. If mounted, he would spy us out before we could dodge back. No need to use the excuse we got at the knife point, unless we are obliged."

Miguel said not a word in reply, but followed Serapio, who always took the lead until the moment of actual fighting came. Then no one man could show the giant the way.

Knowing every foot of the ground, the scalp-hunters lost no time by forced detours, like Joaquin, but he had started a full hour ahead of them, and, as the reader has seen, pushed his horse on at breakneck speed. Hence it was that the scalp-hunters reached the rendezvous too late—for they were yet half a mile away when Carmela made her desperate break for liberty.

From the higher ground on which they stood, the two men noted the course of the chase, and they also saw Joaquin Murieta riding hard to cut the outlaws off.

A torrent of curses burst from Serapio's lips, but Miguel said nothing. With one comprehensive glance, he took in the whole scene, then set off at full speed, his long legs covering the ground in a wonderful manner, taking rocks and bushes in their stride. And at his heels ran Serapio, making up in activity what he lacked in length of legs.

No horse could have followed the course they took, save at a walk, and few men could have kept pace with them, but the task they sought to accomplish was far beyond mortal powers in the limited time at their disposal. The chase led directly away from them, and at the very outset they were thrown far behind. Still they persevered, though reason told them that the end must come long before they could reach the goal.

From far away they heard the firing which accompanied the swift and deadly attack made by Joaquin upon the four leading outlaws, but when they reached a point from whence they could view the ground beyond, it was only to behold their friend rushing madly to his fate, led into the cunning ambush provided by Black Lopez, through his love for Carmela, whom they recognized as she stood upon the rock.

"Hal!" panted Serapio, "there's trouble ahead! she is motioning him back, but the blind boy does not understand. Ah!"

A fierce groan burst from his lips as he saw Joaquin dragged to the ground by the lassies of the ambushed outlaws, who rushed out and pounced upon him like wolves on a wounded buffalo. For once Serapio fairly lost his head, and was about to dash madly forward, when the giant grasped his arm and forced him down behind cover.

"If living, we'll rescue him; if dead—may the Blessed Virgin forbid!—we will bitterly avenge him. Until one or the other is done, our lives are not our own to throw away. Remember that, and be a man, comrade!"

This was a wonderfully long speech for the taciturn scalp-hunter to make, and it produced the effect intended. His mad rage cooled, and Serapio was once more himself.

From under cover they watched keenly every movement made by the enemy. They saw Joaquin lifted and carried away, and this gave them new hope, for it was not likely that so much trouble would be taken for a dead man.

Stealthily they crept forward, and exercising their utmost skill as scouts, soon succeeded in

gaining a position from whence they could look down upon the little plateau, where they saw Black Lopez and Sanchez, the one-eyed, in consultation.

They were too far distant to overhear the words spoken, but when they saw the two ruffians clasp hands, and heard Black Lopez summon half a dozen of the one-eyed rascal's men from below, they had no difficulty in divining the truth. Still, they waited until they saw Carmela torn away from her helpless lover, until they saw Sanchez and his men bearing Joaquin toward the path which led to the level, then they beat a hasty retreat, only pausing when they reached a point from whence they could number the force of the enemy, and see which way they headed.

"Nine besides old One-eye—only a mouthful for us!" said Serapio, coolly. "See! they are taking the back trail. Come!"

Swiftly they ran, feeling sure that they would be in time to intercept the enemy, who would now have no object for pressing their wearied horses hard. Besides, there was a short cut, practicable to footmen, which greatly lessened the distance.

At intervals one or the other ran up to the crest of the ridge, to make sure that the enemy had not turned into another trail, but each time they were reassured.

"We are far enough now from the hill," said Serapio, after nearly an hour's racing. "Over yonder is a snug spot for an ambush. We can reach it and have time enough to catch breath before the rascals come up."

Five minutes later they were lying in ambush at a point where the narrow trail abruptly spread out into an oval-shaped space, feeling sure that here the enemy would close ranks. And the result justified their reasoning. From double file, the outlaws came together in a clump, and then, like the crack of doom, the revolvers of the two scalp-hunters opened fire, not a bullet being wasted, but each one claiming a life!

CHAPTER XXVI.

RANSOMED.

THE terrible execution which can be done by a single man armed with revolvers, is well-nigh incredible, despite the many illustrations given during the war for the Union, along the South-western borders. It was this wonderful skill that rendered the guerrillas of Quantrell, Todd and Anderson such dreaded foes. Whether riding or standing, at a flying or stationary mark, they could plant each bullet within a hand's breadth of the center, and seldom had to fire twice at the same mark. Their weapons would work as rapidly as the ticking of a watch.

So it was when the two scalp-hunters rose in ambush and opened fire upon the astounded outlaws having Joaquin Murieta in charge. So swiftly were their revolvers worked that the different reports were blended together in one roll, that ended almost as soon as it began—for lack of living targets!

The enemy were not given time to realize the terrible situation. Not one was given time to draw a weapon or make a single motion toward escape. In swift succession they were shot down, dead or dying, and almost before Joaquin Murieta could realize that an ambush was being sprung by those who were friendly to himself, all was over.*

With a yell of delight, Serapio leaped forward and caught the frightened horse to which the young Sonorian was bound, before it could take to flight. Miguel quickly cut his bonds, and lifting him to the ground, supported him until his benumbed limbs were capable of performing their office.

"After all, Don Joaquin, it is not so bad to have friends within reach, in case of accidents, is it?" chuckled Serapio.

"Look out! to cover—somebody coming!" rumbled the giant, snatching a brace of revolvers from the nearest body and thrusting them into the hands of the young Sonorian.

From up the pass came the trampling of iron-shod hoofs, proclaiming a strong force, whether friendly or inimical.

Serapio cut two belts with his knife, and carried weapons and all with him as he leaped back to cover.

Scarcely had the three friends reached this, when the head of the column dashed into the oval space, abruptly drawing rein as they beheld the prancing horses and the dead men. It seemed the work of evil spirits—so swiftly had all occurred. Scarce a minute since the firing began, and now ten stout men lay weltering in their blood, while naught was to be seen of the slayers!

Only for a moment. Joaquin recognized several of the horsemen, among them Don Luis

*To those who may object to this incident as highly improbable, I would state that proof can be given where one of Quantrell's men waylaid and killed nine Union soldiers in as many successive shots with revolvers, before a single shot could be fired in return.—B.

Felix, and he shouted for his friends to hold their fire as he leaped into the open.

It was a rash movement, for Don Luis instantly recognized him, and whipped forth his saber, crying:

"'Tis the foul assassin of my father! 'Tis Joaquin Murieta! Charge—and take him, dead or alive!"

"Hold! or you're a dead man!" screamed Serapio, and with ready revolvers the two scalp-hunters leaped out and placed themselves beside Joaquin.

Involuntarily Don Luis recoiled, and his friends also held back. It was clear that these men had wrought the bloody work before them, and with such terrible evidence of their prowess, the hesitation on their part was but natural.

"You know me for a man of my word, Don Luis Felix," added Serapio, more calmly. "I swear to you that Don Joaquin never committed the crime which you lay at his door. The real assassin has confessed, and is now in our power. Pledge your honor as a Spanish gentleman to give us time to prove this, and we will quietly surrender. Refuse—and you may take us as best you can—but best say your prayers first, for my first bullet will probe your brain."

The young Spaniard was not all evil. He could be both generous and just when not under the baneful influence of Don Manuel Camplido. He had been kept in ignorance of the foul plot which his pretended friend had formed, and really believed that the account given by the treacherous escort was true in every particular. When his father, scalpless and otherwise terribly injured, was brought home and the black charges made against the young Sonorian, he at once collected a strong force and set out to avenge the dastardly deed and rescue his sister from the ravisher.

He knew the scalp-hunters well, and for the first time a doubt of Joaquin Murieta's guilt came into his mind.

"You have my pledge, backed by that of these gentlemen," he replied. "Prove your words, and I will apologize to your friend. But if you fail, he dies the death befitting a foul assassin and kidnapper!"

"I accept the alternative, Don Luis Felix," said Joaquin, advancing with his revolvers reversed in his hands. "I charge Don Manuel Camplido with the crime, and will prove it by his own confession. These dead dogs were a part of his tools—ha!" he exclaimed as Sanchez the one-eyed uttered a hollow groan and struggled to a sitting posture. "He can bear evidence. Quick! question him before he dies!"

Don Luis turned pale as a ghost as he began to realize the fearful truth; but he leaped to the ground, and, supporting the dying wretch, demanded from him the truth.

"Tell all, and you may die in peace. Refuse, and I will tie you between four horses and drag you limb from limb!"

Bold enough when well, Sanchez, like the majority of rascals, was cowed by the approach of death, and painfully gasped forth the truth, wholly exculpating the young Sonorian.

Don Luis arose as the villain fell back, dead, and in a cold, constrained manner, asked Joaquin's pardon for his unjust suspicions.

"Granted, senor," was the quiet response. "A man might be excused for doubting his own brother on such evidence as was given you. But now your sister is held a captive for ransom by Black Lopez, formerly a servant on your estate. He is not far from here, and his position is a strong one, but we are enough to carry it by storm."

"And so insure her death," broke in Serapio. "Black Lopez would send a bullet through her brain, or sink a knife to her heart, before you could win your way up that hill."

"Pay the price he demands, and then, when the Sonorita Felix is safe beyond his reach, we can take ample vengeance on the audacious rascal," suggested one of the rancheiros.

"Trust to me, and you shall secure both the lady and revenge without risking a peso," confidently declared Serapio. "Give me the three best hands with a pistol among you, and we six—adding Don Joaquin, Miguel and myself—will do the work."

"Your plan—quick!" demanded Don Luis.

"Miguel and I know a secret trail by which we can reach the plateau where the villains are located. While we are doing this, let the rest of you ride forward and summon the rascals to a parley. It may be that they will be expecting you, if the sounds of our firing reached their ears, but even so, so much the better. Their whole attention will be given to the trail by which you must approach them. Show that you know where they are located, before they can spring an ambush upon you. State that you surprised and killed these rascals, but that Sanchez lived long enough to make full confession. Pretend that you are willing to ransom the lady—use any subterfuge to keep them in play until we can get in our work. At the first pistol shot from the hill, charge boldly in."

Rapidly the words were uttered, placing the matter in such a clear light that there was no need of asking questions.

Don Luis at once declared that he would be

one of the three to accompany the scalp-hunters and Joaquin, but Serapio objected.

"You can aid us more surely in front, senor. The chief rascal will be more ready to parley with you than any other."

So it was finally decided. Serapio selected three men of whose skill with weapons he was satisfied, and then he led the way at a rapid pace to strike the rear of the hill on which Black Lopez had formed his head-quarters.

It was nearly the same trail which he and Miguel had already traversed over that day, and the present attempt equaled the first in its success.

They paused under cover from whence they could look down upon the plateau. They could hear the loud, coarse voice of Black Lopez hailing their allies on the level below, but as he occupied a position on the rock from whence Joaquin had been lured into the snare, his form was hidden from them.

Only a few of the outlaws were in sight, and those near the entrance to the plateau. Carmela was lying close by one of the huts, bound, but otherwise unguarded. Joaquin caught sight of her, and forgetting all else, rushed recklessly down the slope.

He was instantly followed, but the noise unavoidably made by such a hasty charge, attracted the attention of the enemy, and they instantly gave the alarm, which brought Black Lopez rushing to defend his prize.

The two scalp-hunters discharged one shot each, but this was to give the signal for charging to their allies, since aim was impracticable while plunging down such a steep.

Joaquin reached the plateau first, and paused not until he gained the side of Carmela, who uttered his name with a sobbing cry of great joy. He steadied himself for an instant and covered the hideous figure of Black Lopez. Straight home sped the lead, and leaping high into the air with a wild-beast howl, the outlaw crashed heavily upon his face, dead ere his carcass touched the ground.

Joaquin waited not to witness the result of his shot, but caught up the maiden and bounded away with her to a safe cover among the rocks. She was all in all to him, and her safety was his main care. But still he did not shirk the fight, when once satisfied that the enemy were all in front.

Side by side the six men fought, their unerring revolvers cutting down the panic-stricken outlaws as they rushed into the level. After the first brief skirmish, the fight degenerated into a massacre. Taken so utterly by surprise, between two fires, their leader killed at the very outset, the outlaws were like a gang of terrified wolves, whom the hunters have closely surrounded. A few died snapping and snarling in desperation, but those were the exceptions. And in ten minutes after the first shot was fired, the end came.

Don Luis clasped his sister to his breast with more real affection than he had shown her for many a long day, but he was only coldly polite toward Joaquin Murieta, and the hearts of the lovers grew heavy as they realized that there were yet dark clouds still overhanging their pathway.

Before being put to death, the few wounded outlaws were forced to tell where their horses were hidden and their ill-gotten booty stored. Then the rude huts were fired, and the victorious cavalcade turned their faces toward the hidden home of the scalp-hunters.

This was reached late in the afternoon, and Don Manuel Camplido dragged from his place of concealment by Serapio and Miguel, who refused permission for any one to bear them company. The wretched villain was nearly suffocated when lowered from the den by means of the ladder of skins, and his senses gave entirely away when he recognized Joaquin at liberty, beside Carmela Felix.

He was bound upon a horse, then the cavalcade resumed their march toward the Felix rancho.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN OMINOUS BRIDAL.

It was late in the night succeeding that on which Carmela Felix was restored to the arms of her suffering father. For hours after that meeting he lay like one in a trance, and all who were permitted access to his bedside, feared that his spirit would leave its earthly tenement without another interval of consciousness. But then he seemed to rally, and insisted on hearing the whole story of the tragedy and her subsequent adventures from the lips of his daughters. Though the surgeon and the priests feared the worst from this indiscretion, Don Felix persisted in having his own way, just as he had done all his life, and they could only submit.

Carmela, despite her great grief at his precarious condition, could not help setting forth the conduct of her lover in the most favorable light, and her heart grew lighter as she saw that her words were not without the hoped-for result.

Don Felix was hot-tempered and very proud,

but at bottom he was just and generous. He knew that he had bitterly wronged the young Sonorian, and though it caused his family pride a heavy blow, he resolved to make what amends lay in his power. This may have been partly because he was convinced that his son and heir was no fit guardian for Carmela, but if so, he never gave utterance to the doubt in plain words.

After Carmela left him, in obedience to his wishes, he summoned Don Luis, and they were closeted together for hours. What passed between them was never known, but at the end Don Luis, white and angry-looking, left the building and rode away as fast as his good horse could carry him.

It was not until late in the night that Don Felix again roused up and issued a set of orders that put the whole household in a flutter. Joaquin, who had lingered near in hopes of securing a parting word with his loved one, was found and hurried without explanation into the room where Don Felix lay. He saw the priests in attendance—saw Carmela kneeling beside the death-bed, and his heart grew full of strangely conflicting emotions.

Don Felix held out his thin, white hand, and, as if drawn by a magnet, Joaquin advanced and took it in his own.

"Senor," began Don Felix, his voice low, but very distinct, "I have deeply wronged you by both deed and word. As a man of honor, I wish to make what reparation lies in my power. Once you told me that you loved my daughter, and that she loved you in return. Carmela has since confirmed your words. And now, senor, as the surest method of proving the sincerity of my repentance, I ask you, before these witnesses, have your sentiments changed, or do you still desire to make my daughter your wife?"

Joaquin turned pale as a corpse, and staggered as though a heavy blow had been dealt him. But then he saw Carmela raise her head—he read the love-light in her eyes, and once more he was himself.

"Don Felix, I would die for her sake—then think what a heaven this earth would be to me, united to her!"

A faint smile crept over the face of the dying man. The answer pleased him, and he added:

"May Heaven deal with you, as you deal with her! Pedro—I am growing faint. Perform your duty—I must give my children a father's blessing ere I die!"

It was a strange, weird bridal!

The final words were spoken that united Carmela and Joaquin Murieta for life. The dying man raised his trembling hands to bless them, but the action was never completed.

From the group of domestics near the door, a dark form, covered with hood and cowl, glided swiftly forward and with a sharp cry raised a long, slender poniard above the bride's bosom. Like lightning the weapon descended, but with wonderful dexterity Joaquin caught the wrist of the assassin and hurled her forcibly away. Her, for the hood flew back, revealing the convulsed yet still beautiful features of Josefa, the half-breed girl!

A shriek of baffled rage and anguish burst from her livid lips as she fell to the floor. And then, before a hand could be raised, she plunged the glittering weapon to the very hilt in her own bosom. No need of a second blow. The steel had pierced her heart, and she died without a moan.

With a gasping cry of terror, Carmela flung herself upon the breast of her father—upon his corpse, for the terrible danger which so unexpectedly menaced his daughter, had snapped the slender thread of life.

Truly this was an ominous bridal, and terribly did after events confirm the superstition!

There was one more startling occurrence in store for that never-to-be-forgotten night.

While all was confusion in the chamber of death, a trembling servant entered and reported that Don Manuel Camplido had in some mysterious manner removed his irons and vanished from the strong-room where he had been confined. Nor could the closest search discover aught of him, in or about the hacienda.

There is little more to add to this record of the early days of Joaquin Murieta. He and Carmela did not tarry long at the hacienda, for Don Luis was not an agreeable host. He clearly deemed his race disgraced by the alliance Carmela had made, and the young couple started for the young Sonorian's paternal home.

During one brief year, they were happy and contented; life to them was like a pleasant dream—but then the storm-clouds gathered, and the heavy storms, which were to transform the hot-tempered but honest and even noble-hearted youth into an outcast from society, his name into the synonym for bloodthirsty deeds and terrible vengeance, began to fall, thick and fast; but the record of those dark days does not belong to this story. My purpose is to show what Joaquin Murieta was, before he was driven to the bad, and this I have already done, to the best of my poor ability.

THE END.

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